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Reconciling equality and difference: British interwar feminism and the debate over protective legislation.

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**RECONCILING EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE: BRITISH INTERWAR FEMINISM AND
THE DEBATE OVER PROTECTIVE LEGISLATION**

**by
Anne Clendinning**

**A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of History
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
University of Windsor**

**Windsor, Ontario, Canada
1993**

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Abstract

Despite ideological and class differences, the suffrage campaign provided a focal point for the British feminist movement. However, after women's partial enfranchisement in 1918 and their increased involvement in national politics, the women's movement as a whole experienced a decline. While this decline was precipitated by several important factors, including male political indifference and the growing interwar "cult of domesticity," most importantly, at least to this paper, was the reemergence of ideological divisions which the suffrage campaign had only temporarily and partially concealed.

During the 1920s, discussions over policy and preferred strategies for change polarized social reform and equalitarian feminists while the demands of mainstream party politics added yet another divisive element. Although feminist activists disagreed on several key issues, the debate over sex-based protective legislation effectively illustrates these fundamental ideological divisions. The resulting "pamphlet war" between feminist factions provides ample documentation of this debate.

Historians agree that ideological divisions within the women's movement precipitated its post-suffrage decline. However, they assume that these differences could have been overcome had women reached some form of political or strategic consensus. Consequently, historians have attempted to pinpoint which group or political party might have best served women's interests between the wars. However, in so doing, they have assumed the existence of collective gender interests and underestimated the depth of long-standing and natural political divisions among female activists.

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List of Abbreviations

CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
ELFS	East London Federation of Suffragettes
ILP	Independent Labour Party
NFWW	National Federation of Women Workers
NUSEC	National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship
NUWSS	National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies
ODC	Open Door Council
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SJC	Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organizations
SPG	Six Point Group
WCG	Women's Cooperative Guild
WIC	Women's Industrial Council
WLL	Women's Labour League
WSPU	Women's Social and Political Union
WTUA	Women's Trade Union Association
WTUL	Women's Trade Union League

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Introduction

And now, the great tasks that lie before us, Peace, Reform and all the rest, will be so much easier to work at. We shall have a weapon in our hands, and hitherto we have had none.¹

Socialist Isabella Ford considered the vote a victory for women. A trade union activist from Leeds and member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), Ford confidently anticipated that women would use this political weapon to fight against economic, social and legal oppression. The legislation of female suffrage by David Lloyd George's Coalition government was a means to an end: social and sexual equality. The 1918 Representation of the People Act, which qualified men for the vote at age 21, and women at 30, might have fallen short of feminists' demands for absolute political parity. Nevertheless, for Isabella Ford and other feminists, the vote represented, both symbolically and literally, a means whereby women could achieve their overdue emancipation, and implement a feminist agenda which included absolute legal, economic and social equality, improved women's medical care, equal pay for working women, and a state-funded family endowment scheme.

From a historical perspective, Ford's statement appears not only idealistic, but ironic. Although they attained formal political equality, women's social and economic gains during the interwar period were far less significant than many feminists expected. To be sure, after 1918 increasing numbers of women were directly involved in party politics. Despite the vote, however, they made little headway with their feminist agenda. Indeed, the few occupational gains women made during the war were quickly undermined by the post-war reconstruction schemes for economic and social "normalization".

This study considers the possible reasons for the apparent political ineffectiveness of the women's movement during the 1920s and has two main foci. First, it presents a survey of the current historiographic debate concerning the women's movement and the reasons for its apparent decline during the twenties. Second, to better illuminate the terms of the current historiography, it examines the specific contemporary feminist debate regarding sex-based protective legislation, which erupted between liberal and social reform feminists and effectively polarized the post-war women's movement. Thus, as a case study, the debate over protective legislation illustrates the fundamental ideological differences which effectively hindered the progress of women's reforms despite their newly acquired political representation. By analyzing the language and ideological perspectives of the protective legislation debate, the study attempts to elucidate both the contemporary feminist discourse and the ongoing debate between historians of British women.

Historians have identified several predominant reasons for the limited progress of feminist aspirations between the wars. One was male political indifference to women's proposals for social and economic reforms. It would be unfair, however, to assume that politicians were completely unresponsive to women during the 1920s. For example, the Conservative Party did attract large numbers of female voters, through the Primrose League and the Women's Unionist Organization. By 1928, the Tories claimed a female membership of around one million. Yet, according to Martin Pugh, the impact of women on the Conservative Party was extremely limited. Pugh contends that Conservative women must, to an extent, share the blame for the party's indifference to women's issues. The Party contained a few women who were committed to feminist causes like equal pay

and professional opportunities for women, such as Nancy Astor MP. But the majority of Tory women preferred organizing fundraisers and socials to political activity, on the patriarchal assumption that men were more suited to public life than women. In addition, Conservative women opposed feminist reforms; for example, they rejected proposals for family endowment and public birth control information. Ironically, given the Tory women's indifference to specific female reforms, the Primrose League was marginalized politically within its own party. In an attempt to appeal to women and attract the votes of the "homemaker" as well as the "breadwinner," the Baldwin cabinet adopted a more progressive attitude to women's issues, like housing and maternal health, than did its female organizations.²

The demise of the Liberal Party in the 1920s might account for its poor showing in the field of feminist politics. In the past, Victorian and Edwardian feminists had worked through the Liberal Party, and in some respects, equal rights feminism drew on Liberal ideology. However, any possibility of further collaboration between progressive Liberals and feminists disappeared with the post-World War I decline of the party, and its subsequent political collapse. Indeed, the Liberal Party seemed to have forgotten its pre-war interest in women's concerns, and unlike either the Tories or Labour, the Liberals made no efforts to capture the votes of newly enfranchised women.³ No doubt the Liberal apathy to women further isolated feminists from the Party. For example, a social reform feminist and progressive liberal, Eleanor Rathbone, sat in the House of Commons between 1929 and 1948 as an independent, a decision not unconnected to the party's internal disarray and its apparent uninterest in women's issues.⁴ Nevertheless, the Liberal tradition survived independently in the equalitarian or "old" stream of the post-suffrage feminist movement.

While all three parties hesitated over women's demands, historians and feminists criticize the Labour Party in particular for its ambivalent position towards women. From the late nineteenth-century, labour politicians, such as Keir Hardie of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), acknowledged the relationship between women's rights and social reform. Many women supported Labour even before they obtained the franchise, as it appeared the most sympathetic to their concerns. With the franchise, women joined the Labour Party in increasing numbers.⁵ According to Keith Laybourn, the Party itself mounted a post-suffrage campaign to attract women voters, particularly from the working class.⁶ In addition, the Labour Party courted the female vote via its 1918 publication, Women and the Labour Party, a collection of essays which outlined the party's strong commitment to women's issues. Labour supported a wide range of proposals of direct relevance to women in the home and the workplace, extending from the provision of state funded nursery schools and better housing, to support for improved women's trade union representation and increased industrial legislation to protect the health and safety of female workers.⁷

While the Labour Party actively recruited women voters, its official rhetoric concurred with its alleged commitment to gender equality. The Party's reconstruction plan, Labour and the New Social Order (1918), condemned all forms of social oppression. It anticipated the establishment of a "true Democracy" under socialism wherein all citizens would be ensured a "healthy equality of material circumstances" that derived from planned co-operation, and not the enforced exploitation of "subject nations and races, subject classes or a subject sex."⁸ Besides this general reference to sexual equality, Labour's reconstruction document advocated women's "complete emancipation," and to this end, Labour supported the removal of any restrictions on women's professional

employment, defended the principle of equal pay for equal work and urged trade unions to admit women members. On the subject of protective legislation, Labour proposed a full enquiry into "all occupations previously held to be unhealthy or unsuitable for women, about the conditions under which the work is done, in order to obtain such improvement of the conditions as will remove the objection or protect the workers from harm."⁹

Evidently Labour recognized the post-war concern over female industrial employment. The party acknowledged that, given their wartime work experience, many women successfully performed jobs that they were previously thought incapable of. However, the wartime relaxation of the Factory Acts subjected women to potentially unsafe work situations, as in the munitions factories. Labour anticipated the post-war necessity to reevaluate the conditions of women's industrial employment, with a view to increasing occupational opportunities for women while ensuring their increased safety in the workplace.

A decade later, Ramsay MacDonald's Labour and the Nation restated the party's position on women's rights. While Sidney Webb's reconstruction document had addressed controversial issues like equal pay, trade union membership and protective legislation, MacDonald's document signalled a change in Labour's viewpoint: it emphasized the political needs of women in the home, as wives and mothers. MacDonald failed to mention the industrial problems women experienced in their work outside the home and made no direct reference to women's industrial employment, a curious omission considering the contemporary controversy over protective legislation. Instead, Labour and the Nation stressed the common political interests of men and women in the goal of international peace and socialist equality. Labour praised women's special concern with the "development of the social

services, with care for the mother and the infant, for the child and the sick, for the bereaved, the aged and the workless, with the general conditions of home life, and with the preservation of peace."¹⁰ Although Labour still defended its commitment to women's issues, by the late twenties those issues specifically corresponded to gendered notions of women as social guardians and nurturers, and not as professional or industrial equals.

After the war, Labour's official policy towards women workers suggested the continued tensions between male trade unionists and female Labour activists, and the prevailing influence of organized labour within the party. For example, Labour endorsed the Restitution of Pre-War Practices Act (1918), which legislated the dismissal of female workers to create jobs for returning veterans. Evidently the Labour Party supported the traditional trade unionists insistence on jobs for male "breadwinners" and advised unemployed industrial women to accept low paid and unorganized domestic service positions.¹¹ The dismissal of industrial women and their relegation to domestic work helped eliminate female competition in the workplace. It also reinforced gender distinctions between skilled male and unskilled female work, and reasserted the traditional separate sphere ideology that women's place was in the home. The prominent suffrage activist and ILP member, Ada Neild Chew, commented with some frustration that her natural political sympathies inclined her to vote Labour, but too often the Labour candidates were no more sympathetic to women's issues than their opponents.¹² By its support for measures which limited women's employment opportunities, it appears then, that the Labour Party's attention to women's specific social and economic needs was negligible despite its rhetorical commitment to social reform and gender equality.

Pamela Graves offers several possible reasons for

Labour's ambivalence to feminism and the women's movement generally. The majority of male activists were extremely uncomfortable with the prospect of women stepping beyond the traditional domestic sphere and asking for political power and responsibility. The promise of sexual equality under socialism further strained gender relations, and forced males to find arguments to restrict women's autonomy without openly denying their equality. By demanding greater political representation or support for women's issues, such as equal pay and divorce law reform, organized women were accused of creating "sex antagonisms" and thereby threatening class and party unity.¹³ Labour leader Arthur Henderson reiterated this view in a 1918 publication. He warned female voters against the divisive nature of women's issues advocated by "undemocratic" feminists, and repeatedly stressed the "common interests of both sexes," thereby calling for class unity and gender co-operation within the party.¹⁴ Thus, Henderson conflated the politics of class and gender in his appeal to women voters.

Evidently, even before female enfranchisement, Labour leaders suspected feminism as a potentially divisive force. As the political representative of the labour movement, the Edwardian Labour Party was a loose affiliation of working-class trade unionists, and the predominantly middle-class ILP and Fabian socialists. From its inception in 1904, the party was bisected by class and ideology. Leaders like MacDonald and Snowden feared that gender politics added yet another potentially divisive force. And despite the strained alliance between socialists and trade unions, the Labour Party depended on trade union funds and working class support. From the trade unionist perspective, feminist demands for political and legal rights and women's equal access to trade union membership and employment were suspect, since they threatened traditional gender hierarchies in the

home and the workplace. No doubt Labour's ambivalence towards women's rights was related to the overwhelming conservatism of the male trade unionists. Indeed, the Party's rhetoric of class solidarity reflected the need to smooth over internal political differences related not only to class and ideology, but also to gender.

The legislative changes of the 1920s reflected the prevalent political attitudes to women's issues. Between 1918 and 1929, the Coalition and Conservative governments passed nine pieces of legislation of direct relevance to women. They included the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act (1919) which lifted restrictions on women entering professions, occupations and civic positions, and the Matrimonial Causes Act (1923) which gave women equal grounds for divorce. In his assessment of the 1920s "women's legislation," Martin Pugh notes that the reforms did not demonstrate a commitment to feminist concerns, but were simply extensions of existing legislation. He emphasizes that the new laws dealt predominantly with domestic issues like child custody, adoption, maintenance of married women and the marriage age. Such reforms addressed women's role as mothers and wives, and were compatible with the Conservative Party's interest in preserving the home and family in the interests of the nation. According to Pugh, Labour was also comfortable with these reforms, since they assisted the working-class mother and housewife, and could be interpreted as a means of raising the living standards of the community in general.¹⁵

While male political uninterest partially accounts for the slow progress of women's reforms, a general anti-feminist sentiment also undermined the post-suffrage women's movement. Throughout the suffrage campaign increasing numbers of women endorsed the feminist demand for the vote. Later, as a result of the First World War, women challenged gendered notions of their capabilities by performing non-traditional

work. Both the suffrage campaign and women's wartime employment undermined traditional demarcations between the male and female spheres. After the war and women's partial enfranchisement, the popular vision of social reconstruction presented by politicians, intellectuals and the media stressed a return to pre-war social relations and traditional sex roles. The politicians' direct calls for an end to the "sex antagonism" of the suffrage years reflected this sentiment.

Intellectuals, particularly psychologists and sexologists, stressed the need for harmony between the sexes. Havelock Ellis' book, The Psychology of Sex, emphasized the importance of sexual relations between men and women, companionate marriage and motherhood. During the twenties, numerous marriage manuals revealed a new preoccupation with conjugal harmony as a possible means of ensuring social and sexual normalization after the war.¹⁶ As heterosexual, married women became the idealized norm, medical experts labelled single women, especially single feminist women, as frigid, abnormal and sexually maladjusted. The growing attention directed at harmonious heterosexual relations had the additional effect of casting lesbianism in a highly negative light as sexual relationships between women were interpreted as both deviant and dangerously subversive.¹⁷ Susan Kingsley Kent and Sheila Jeffries agree that the new emphasis on sexual harmony between men and women actually undermined the pre-war feminist critique of women's sexual subordination. Ironically, the rhetoric of sexual liberation reinforced traditional separate sphere ideology, and strengthened the interwar adulation of modern domesticity and motherhood. In contrast, feminism became associated increasingly with old-fashioned spinsterhood or the malaise of misguided women trying to imitate men.¹⁸

Although the discourse of sexual reform reflected the

post-suffrage anti-feminist backlash, the images of domestic bliss and contented womanhood presented in the popular press more effectively undermined post-suffrage feminism.

Immediately after the war, the press urged women factory operatives to leave their jobs and return to their natural duties in the home. Feminist and suffragist Ray Strachey noted that those who remained in the workforce were branded "blacklegs," although only months before the press had praised female workers for their wartime contributions.¹⁹ The images in advertising also pressured women to resume cheerfully their wifely duties, as the advertisers of products like cosmetics, cocoa and cleaning agents stressed the importance of feminine beauty and the virtues of domesticity. Deirdre Beddoe observes the changing images of women in advertising between 1918 and 1920, as sketches and slogans about factory girls were replaced by those of happy young wives. Beddoe also notes the enormous growth of women's magazines during the twenties and thirties. Titles like Good Housekeeping, Mother and Woman and Home suggest the focus of these journals. All extolled the importance of motherhood and elevated domesticity to a science. The new womens' journals made few references to feminism or professional women, and by implication reinforced the negative stereotype of emancipated women. Admittedly, several feminist magazines continued throughout the interwar period, notably Time and Tide published by Lady Rhondda's Six Point Group, and the NUSEC's Woman's Leader. However, Beddoe claims that in comparison to the domestic magazines, their readership was small, and their feminist articles had little appeal for ordinary British women who willingly internalized the domestic ideal of the popular press.²⁰ With the franchise won and the war over, the majority of women wished only to return "to home and duty." In contrast, feminism appeared out-dated-the pre-occupation of a privileged minority or

disgruntled spinsters. Immediately after the war, this message was forcefully presented by the popular press and intellectual literature, thereby exacerbating the demise of the women's movement.

Although the first two explanations are important this study examines a third important reason for the apparent demise of feminist politics in the twenties: the resurgence of long-standing and natural divisions within the movement along ideological and class lines. After 1918, disagreements erupted over competing strategies for feminist change and political priorities as women activists debated exactly what constituted a feminist cause, now that women over 30 had political representation. Distinct ideological and class biases were fundamental to these deep divisions, as was the problem of integrating feminism with women's domestic role.

It should be noted, of course, that the pre-war movement had never operated as a unified organization. However, despite the divergent political and class interests of various feminist and female workers' organizations, the Edwardian women's movement was fundamentally directed towards a single issue--the achievement of the franchise for women. Suffragist groups disputed the terms of female enfranchisement, from the mere removal of the sexually biased property qualification to the extension of political rights to all adults, regardless of gender. Yet, notwithstanding these differences, the suffrage campaign did provide a focal point for the women's movement.²¹ However, after 1918 the movement was even less cohesive than in the pre-war era, as feminists divided into smaller, single issue groups, and developed divisive political party allegiances in hopes of furthering their respective causes. Given women's formal acceptance into party politics, the unity of the post-suffrage women's movement was undermined by class divisions which the suffrage campaign had partially and temporarily

overshadowed.

Broadly speaking, post-suffrage feminists divided into two main camps and identified two main strategies to improve women's social and economic position. "Equalitarian feminists" insisted that, fundamentally, men and women were equal and should be treated as such by the state. Motivated by liberal humanism, equal rights feminists stressed the removal of any legal and political obstacles which interfered with women's rights as individuals and citizens. Consequently, equalitarian feminists, like members of Lady Rhondda's Six Point Group, an off-shoot of the suffragist National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), prioritized the continued struggle to enfranchise all women, and opposed restrictions on women's right to work.²² In contrast to the equalitarians, "social reform feminists", including Eleanor Rathbone's NUSEC "new" feminist faction and feminists within Labour's Women's Sections, promoted ameliorative programs to assist women as wives and mothers in the home. Reform feminists recognized that although idealistically men and women were equal, realistically women's needs were different from men's given their important maternal role. Social reform feminists argued that if women were to achieve "real equality," the state must acknowledge women's invaluable domestic contribution via increased public assistance in the form of family endowment payments, affordable sanitary housing and improved maternal health facilities. Ideologically, social reform feminism, described as "new" feminism by Eleanor Rathbone, shared many aspirations with the socialist agenda of the Labour Party. Many prominent social reform or "new" feminists, including Eva Hubback, Margaret McMillan and Margaret Llewelyn Davies, were active Labour Party members. Nevertheless, social reform feminism transcended party divisions. For example, the progressive independent, Eleanor Rathbone, headed the

interwar family endowment campaign, but drew heavily on the support of Labour women.

Throughout the 1920s, proponents of these two competing feminist strategies debated how best to achieve women's social and economic emancipation. Fundamental to this debate was the difficulty of reconciling the egalitarian feminist demands for absolute equality with the social reform feminist call for recognition of women's different social and political needs as wives and mothers. Although several issues polarized social reformists and equalitarian feminists, the question of protective legislation for industrial women workers exemplified the growing ideological and class tensions which divided the post-suffrage women's movement. Equal rights feminists, working through the Open Door Council, an off-shoot of the NUSEC dedicated to the achievement of employment equity, objected to sex-based legislation and insisted that regulations should be based on the nature of the job, not the sex of the worker. On the other hand, social reform feminists and, in particular, women in the Labour Party, supported protective legislation to prevent the exploitation of unorganized female workers and safeguard the health of potential and actual working-class mothers. It became apparent by the mid-twenties that despite the post-war feminist optimism of activists like Isabella Ford, the "great tasks" of feminism, and indeed social reform, remained as distant and undefined as ever, particularly given the interwar political fragmentation of the women's movement.

Not surprisingly, despite women's enfranchisement and several marginal legislative gains, the post-suffrage feminist hope of gender equality appeared even more distant in 1930 than it had in 1918. As suggested, feminist aspirations were thwarted by male political indifference, a popular anti-feminist backlash reinforced by images of

idealized domesticity, and internal disputes within the feminist movement itself. In addition, the progress of women's emancipation during the 1920s was complicated by the strategic debate between "old" liberal feminists and "new" social welfare feminists. Generally, women in the Labour Party fell within the latter group, given their traditional interest in ameliorative reforms to assist working-class women in the home and the workplace. However, their feminist commitment was constrained by the class ideology of their party, a party which gave class issues priority over those of gender.

Historians of British women have long disputed the significance of the ideological divisions within the post-suffrage women's movement. For example, the ideological debates over "new" feminism may have undermined the unity of organized feminists; however, the "new" domestic focus seemed imperative if feminism was to survive at all during the twenties. The current historiographic debates revolve around two fundamental and related problems: isolating the causes of women's post-suffrage political failure, and offering possible solutions to women's historic political impasse as it occurred in the twenties. These historiographic questions are debated by three distinct schools of thought: Marxist feminist, "Labour" and "Liberal". Significantly, like their feminist historical subjects, historians themselves share conflicting ideological perspectives which roughly correspond to the divisions of the contemporary debates. Although historians agree that feminism's post-suffrage decline can be attributed to ideological differences between female activists, they have misinterpreted the significance of these political divisions. Generally, historians assume that feminist reformers would have been more successful between the wars had they united behind a single party or political strategy. However, this

logic presumes the existence of an over-riding, collective gender solidarity which transcends class and ideology and will somehow unite women in support of a common agenda. What historians have failed to acknowledge is that ideological divisions within the women's movement, as in any other political movement, were both inevitable and natural, and went beyond class divisions. Unfortunately, rather than accepting ideological divisions as long-standing features of any sort of political endeavour, to a great extent historians have sought to identify and defend the most effective strategies that women activists ought to have followed to achieve their desired reforms. The various preferred strategies are imbued with historians' respective definitions of feminism and their own ideological biases. Yet, it is somehow unrealistic to attach success or failure to women activists during the twenties, and equally impossible to judge which group, whether equal rights or social reformist, were the true feminists of the day. As the debate over protective legislation illustrates, the women's movement fragmented along ideological lines, ideological lines which severely threatened, but did not completely preclude, the existence of collective gender interests.

This study examines both the current historiography of inter-war feminism and the contemporary feminist debate over protective legislation. Chapter one presents a historiographic survey of the Marxist feminist, "Labour" and "Liberal" positions. To better understand the terms of the current debate, chapter two examines the historical origins of equalitarian and social reform feminism while chapter three discusses the nineteenth-century debate over sex-based laws, noting similarities and differences to the 1920s confrontation. Finally, chapter four analyzes the debate itself, noting the ideological positions of three main groups: equalitarian "old" feminists, "new" feminists and

social reform feminists in the Labour movement. It must be noted that the disagreement over protective legislation was essentially a political debate between outspoken middle-class activists. Consequently, the opinions of working-class women, the ones most affected by sex-specific legislation, are noticably absent from this debate. As Jane Lewis notes, their response to protective legislation demands greater attention;²³ but it is beyond the scope of this study.

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Chapter 1:

Feminist Politics in the 1920s: The Historiographic Debate

The debate surrounding the failure of women to make an impact on interwar society is shaped by several issues. The historians discussed in this study dispute the fundamental meaning of feminism and the various political alternatives for the implementation of feminist social change. Herein, historians present various interpretations for the apparent failure of the women's movement during the interwar period. While historians offer differing explanations for the demise of feminist politics, their explanations are often shaped by their own ideological convictions and tactical preferences. Yet the historian's task cannot be to decide which group or political strategy best represented women's interests. Instead scholars must acknowledge the ideological differences between the various feminist groups and recognize that ideological differences within the women's movement were long-standing and inevitable.

In surveying the current historiography on the British women's movement during the twenties, it is possible to identify three broad schools of interpretation: Marxist feminist, "Liberal" and "Labour". Admittedly, these general categories overlook the nuances of the historians' individual arguments, and do little justice to the multitude of individual positions within the respective schools. Nevertheless, by contrasting the arguments of the various historians presented in this study, the ideological origins of their arguments become more readily apparent.

The Marxist feminist school led by Sheila Rowbotham focuses on the dialectic relationship between capital and labour, and patriarchy and women. Consequently, Marxist feminism investigates the connections between gender--the organization of sexuality, domestic labour, and the family--

and historical changes in the modes of production.¹ Since women's subordination is directly related to their dual economic and sexual exploitation under capitalism as unpaid domestic workers in the home and underpaid labourers in the workplace, the true emancipation of women is deemed impossible within a capitalist political system. Class consciousness and class struggle provide the catalyst for social change: ideally, the formation of a socialist state, based on the collective ownership of the means of production and the subsequent elimination of class hierarchies. Moreover, under socialism, Marxist feminists anticipate the elimination of gender hierarchies. Indeed, for Marxist feminists, the achievement of sexual equality depends on the complete political transformation of society via revolutionary means if necessary. This transformation would radically affect economic and social structures in both the public and private spheres.²

In contrast to the revolutionary socialism of the Marxist feminist perspective, the "Liberal" school draws on the tenets of liberal humanism. The position of the "Liberal" historians derives from the notion that all adult citizens are fundamentally equal and therefore are entitled to the same social and political rights and freedoms. "Liberal" historians see the compatibility of women's emancipation with a liberal progressivism that transcends class interests. Social progress depends on this equalization of opportunity, achieved through democratic, constitutional and ameliorative reforms. While the Marxist feminist school dismisses the possibility of gender equality under a capitalist economy, the "Liberals" see no contradiction between capitalism and women's emancipation. They envision gender equality as the inevitable result of progressive modernization under a constitutional democratic government, presumably led by a revitalized Liberal Party.

Thus, the "Liberal" school anticipates the political renewal of the Liberal Party as the true vehicle of such reforms. In this study, the work of Brian Harrison, Martin Pugh and, to a lesser extent, Harold Smith, represent the "Liberal" school.³

Finally, "Labour" historians insist on the compatibility of women's emancipation with the constitutional socialism espoused by the Labour Party. Like the Marxist feminist school, "Labour" historians are sympathetic to radical economic and political change; however, like the "Liberal" school, they reject the Marxist advocacy of revolutionary means. Instead, the "Labour" school accepts the possibility of social transformation through gradual constitutional change. Feminist "Labour" historians, represented by Pat Thane and Christine Collette, share the conviction that women's emancipation will result inevitably from Labour's implementation of parliamentary socialism. Of interest to feminist "Labour" historians are the Party's proposals for improved social welfare reforms to assist women as wives and mothers, and state-directed economic restructuring, of assistance to women in the workplace.⁴

All three historiographic schools grapple with the problem of reconciling feminism, as a set of demands relevant primarily to women, with that of class consciousness as a collective interest which crosses gender division. In her article on women's trade unions, American labour historian Robin Miller Jacoby identifies the theoretical contradiction historians face in their discussions of feminism and class consciousness. Miller Jacoby states, "Feminism simultaneously complements and conflicts with the ideology of the primacy of class consciousness. It is complementary in that it implies equal rights and opportunities for women within sexually mixed, class-based settings; it is conflicting in that it also implies that sexual identification creates a solidarity among women that transcends class divisions."⁵ She

continues that ideologically both feminism and class consciousness have "ideal or utopian as well as historical dimensions". However, the ultimate vision of a sexually equal and classless society is expressed in different ways in different periods.⁶ By applying Jacoby Miller's point to our topic, all three of the schools referred to in this study can be seen to offer their own ideologically based agendas for women's emancipation, agendas which correspond closely to the various historical feminist positions. In terms of class consciousness, the "Liberal" school maintains that the equalitarian principles of citizenship and individual freedom transcend class boundaries. Thus feminism, as another manifestation of the liberal demand for equal rights, affects all women, and therefore overrides class boundaries. In contrast, the Marxist feminist and "Labour" schools acknowledge the dual sexual and economic oppression many women face. Both Marxist feminists and "Labour" historians consider class and gender politics inseparable and hesitate to give primacy to either. Feminism, as the struggle for female emancipation, constitutes another dimension of the socialist struggle for systemic political and economic change. Although women experience sexual discrimination that men of their class do not, Marxist feminist and "Labour" historians contend that gender inequality still does not completely undermine the radical potential of shared class interests.⁷

The historiography of the post-suffrage decline of the women's movement is, as yet, an undeveloped debate. Historians' arguments rely on emotive terms, such as socialism and feminism, whose meanings vary as Miller Jacoby suggests with each interpretation. In addition, their own preferred strategic choices for the post-war feminist movement are couched in highly exclusivist terms as the only viable option. Of the three historiographic schools, the

Marxist feminist perspective is the least dominant within both the historical feminist debates and the current critical discourse. Nonetheless, the theoretical framework offered by Marxist feminism profoundly affected the writing of labour and women's history, particularly during the 1970s, and therefore warrants inclusion in this study.

Sheila Rowbotham exemplifies the Marxist feminist position. As stated earlier, she protests against women's dual social and economic oppression under both patriarchy and capitalism. Ideologically, she advocates a radical socialist feminist strategy, which demands the transformation of both economic and social structures, transformations which affect both the private and public spheres.⁸ From this perspective, Rowbotham is critical of Labour women for their adherence to "new" feminism and their failure to adopt a more radical strategy for social change. According to Rowbotham, "new" feminism signaled the demise of radical feminist politics since it failed to challenge traditional gender roles. Although the Labour Party was dominated by non-socialist trades union members, Rowbotham believes the Women's Labour League, (WLL) an affiliate of the Labour Party, might have promoted a stronger socialist feminist position.⁹ She acknowledges the WLL's concern for working women and its attempts to increase women's understanding of Labour politics and trade unionism. However, Rowbotham claims that given their inattention to socialist feminism, and its critique of gender and economic oppression, the WLL missed a valuable opportunity for effecting real social change. She blames the ideological weakness of the WLL, and later the Labour Party Women's Sections on the Fabian and ILP origins of its prominent members and their subsequent adherence to vague reformist gradualism:

Because they [WLL] saw socialism as an accretion of

reforms and the state as a neutral force which would pass to the working class when they became sufficiently enlightened, they also assumed that improvement in the position of women would come in the same way.¹⁰

Evidently, Rowbotham has little faith that Labour's socialist gradualism would affect women's lives in a definite way. Instead, Rowbotham claims that independent socialist feminists, such as Sylvia Pankhurst, offered a more effective radical alternative. She identifies Pankhurst's East London Federation of Suffragettes (ELFS) with socialist feminism for several reasons. As a member of the militant suffragette Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), Sylvia Pankhurst attempted to ally the women's movement with socialism and the labour movement. Later, the ELFS severed its WSPU connections and became heavily involved in working-class politics. For example, the ELFS campaigned against women's sweated work, supported the shop stewards' movement and women's equal pay.¹¹ Convinced that women's emancipation, particularly working-class women's emancipation, depended on radical socialist change, in 1920 Sylvia Pankhurst joined the Communist Party of Great Britain.(CPGB)¹²

Yet, despite their revolutionary intentions, Rowbotham admits that neither ELFS, the SDF or the CPGB offered any real solutions to female inequality. For example, the SDF emphasized working class solidarity to overthrow the current capitalist system. Gender politics potentially undermined the sense of common working-class oppression, and could split

the workers along sex lines. Indeed, the debate over gender versus class politics divided socialist women within the SDF, particularly on the suffrage issue. The ELFS anticipated a truly utopian society, devoid of any economic and gender inequalities. However, the organization's visionary rhetoric was largely due to Sylvia Pankhurst's almost religious conversion to socialism. Pankhurst's actual strategy for social change involved community action among working-class women, like the organization of rent strikes and protests over food prices and alternative employment for women. The ELFS started a toy factory controlled by the workers and a nursery for the children of East-End working mothers. Although both of these endeavours were marginally successful, the ELFS depended on funding from Pankhurst's affluent friends, an obvious contradiction, since the very schemes designed to empower working-class women and initiate social change still relied on middle class charity, which Rowbotham readily acknowledges.¹³

Rowbotham suggests that the WLL leadership was aware of the option of socialist feminism, but chose to adhere instead to the vague rhetoric of Labour gradualism. The WLL's 1918 merger with the Labour Party further undermined its commitment to women's issues as Labour women, such as Marion Phillips, Susan Lawrence and Margaret Bondfield, placed class ahead of gender. With the vote and admission to the parliamentary process, women forgot that they had sought

admission because they believed society could be different. Rowbotham accuses feminists, both Labour and liberal, of redefining their goals as a series of ameliorative reforms within the structure and culture of capitalist patriarchal society.¹⁴

Evidently, the radical alternative offered by Marxist feminism was as peripheral to the political choices available to women during the 1920s as it is to the current historiography. Instead, it is the "Labour" and "Liberal" perspectives which continue to dominate the current debates among historians, just as they shaped the terms of the debates among feminists in the twenties. In both cases, feminists and historians attempted to rationalize women's political equality with women's sexual difference, to reconcile the possible contradiction between collective gender and collective class interests.

In stark contrast to the radical socialism of the Marxist feminist school, "Liberal" historians deny the necessity of political revolution to eliminate gender inequalities. Instead, they contend that democratic progressive liberalism offers the best means of achieving female emancipation. While Rowbotham's definition of feminism implies the need for revolutionary social change, the "Liberals" Brian Harrison and Martin Pugh identify feminism with democratic egalitarianism. They also suggest that politically, feminism, particularly "new" social

reformist feminism, was far more compatible with reformist progressive Liberalism than with trades unionist Labour.¹⁵ Both Harrison and Pugh maintain that the Liberal Party was the natural political ally of the women's movement. If they had worked through the Liberal Party, Harrison suggests, they may have achieved their feminist goals: "Liberalism was an outlook naturally aligned with feminism, and the Liberal Party's survival would have moderated the class loyalties that cut across inter-war feminism."¹⁶ Harrison contends that the Liberal Party ran more female candidates between the wars than either the Conservative or Labour Parties. However, given the Party's internal disarray and the split progressive vote, Liberal women candidates failed to get elected. Pugh similarly suggests that the inter-war decline of feminism was connected to the "demise of radical Liberalism."¹⁷ Both historians are thus forced to admit that given the Party's declining fortunes, it was not a practical alternative for feminist reformers.

In light of Liberalism's demise after World War I, Pugh and Harrison agree that the Labour Party appeared the best political choice for both progressives and feminists. However, they contend that, despite Labour's outward commitment to women's issues, gender politics were easily swept aside as male and female party leaders emphasized class interests over those of gender. In effect, Labour absorbed and diffused feminist politics. The feminists who supported

Labour received little in return; and by joining an essentially trade unionist party, they further undermined the resurgence of a political alternative in the form of the Liberal Party. Pugh and Harrison's studies are thus typical of the "Liberal" school's tendency to treat the Labour Party as a poor and unfortunate substitute for the Liberal Party.¹⁸

In his discussion of women and the inter-war Labour Party, Pugh identifies two distinct female groups--"party loyalists" and "feminists." "Party loyalists," like Lawrence, Phillips and Bondfield, accepted the official party line that gender issues were subordinate to class politics. On the other hand, "feminists," such as Dora Russell, Dorothy Jewson and Monica Whately, moved between the Labour movement and single-sex women's organizations, particularly the NUSEC. Throughout the 1920s, the Labour feminists criticized the Party and its "loyalist" female leadership for their inattention to the specific concerns of women within the Party. For example, although the 1927 National Conference of Labour Women endorsed Dora Russell's motion that the Labour Party support increased access to birth control information at public clinics, female "loyalists" like Bondfield and Phillips rejected the proposal on the basis that Labour men would not support it, and that any ensuing controversy would split the party along sex lines. Similarly, Labour feminists challenged the party's organization and proposed unsuccessfully that the four NEC women's representatives be

elected by the Women's Conference and not the general party conference. Female leaders, notably Marion Phillips, defended Labour's constitution and maintained that women should not elect their own NEC representatives, since this system could produce delegates specifically interested in women's issues, thereby posing a dangerous threat to party unity.¹⁹

Brian Harrison adopts a more sympathetic view of Labour's female leaders. He includes Labour MPs Bondfield, Susan Lawrence and Ellen Wilkinson in a collective biography of interwar feminists, even though he admits that by some definitions they "do not qualify as feminists at all."²⁰ Yet while Harrison includes women of various political backgrounds in his book, he identifies feminism in a more restrictive sense with a liberal, democratic egalitarianism. Consequently, like Pugh, he perceives a fundamental contradiction between feminism and Labour, since the former advocated equal rights and the latter, protectionist employment policies and separate sphere ideology.²¹

Although the Labour Party maintained an ambiguous position towards feminism, Harrison notes that numerous women were attracted to Labour through trades unionism, the Women's Co-Operative Guild, the ILP and the WLL. Bondfield, Lawrence and Wilkinson were Labour's earliest female MPs, and Harrison praises them for their democratic principles and party loyalty.²² However, like Pugh, Harrison agrees that some

Labour women, particularly the "party loyalists," were not feminists in the strictest sense. Bondfield consistently opposed the notion of a specific women's position regarding political issues, and throughout her career as a trade unionist and MP she regularly gave class priority over gender. During the pre-war suffrage debates, for example, Bondfield adamantly opposed women's suffrage; instead, she supported universal suffrage and even headed the Adult Suffrage League. Likewise, Lawrence maintained that women "should not organize themselves on a sex basis".²³ Wilkinson adopted a stronger position on women's issues, and Harrison describes her as a "new" feminist, given her support for ameliorative legislation.²⁴ While Pugh remains critical of female Labour leaders and accuses them of subordinating women's issues to those of class, Harrison claims that these Labour MPs furthered the women's movement via their parliamentary careers, simply by getting into the legislature and operating efficiently once there.²⁵

Like the "Liberal" historians Harrison and Pugh, Smith addresses the relationship between feminists and women in the Labour movement. Less explicit in his support for the Liberal Party than either Harrison or Pugh, Smith must nevertheless be included in the "Liberal" school, given his identification of feminism with liberal equalitarian principles. Smith adopts the definition of feminism offered by his historical subjects in the 1920s. He suggests that feminism is

restricted to single-sex women's groups who advocated legislative reforms directed specifically at women's issues. Feminism is thus seen as basically a middle-class movement, whose goals during the twenties conflicted with those of women working through and in the Labour party.²⁶ Like Pugh, Smith asserts that female Labour leaders neglected gender in favour of class against the wishes of Labour feminist activists and rank and file female members. Thus, in many respects, Smith's critique of Labour women parallels Pugh's interpretation of the female "party loyalists". Smith suggests that female Labour leaders were not feminists and describes them as being caught between a male Labour Party and activists for women's equality, whether they were rank and file party members or feminist pressure groups.

Like Harrison and Pugh, Smith perceives a basic contradiction between feminism and Labour politics. He implies that, ideologically, Liberalism could have better served the feminist agenda, since it transcended class divisions. Against the common criticism that feminism atrophied in the interwar period, especially during the 1930s, both Smith and Harrison point out the continued activities of the NUSEC, the Six Point Group and the Open Door Council, all of which lobbied for women's equal pay and the elimination of employment restrictions for women.²⁷

In opposition to the "Liberal" school, "Labour" historians do not perceive gender and labour politics in

mutually exclusive terms. Proponents of the "Labour" school admit that Labour was dominated by male trade unions, and that by the late Twenties, the Party's commitment to sexual equality might be rightfully questioned. Yet despite these evident shortcomings Labour remained the party most dedicated to real social and economic change; after the franchise act and throughout the 1920s, Labour was still the best choice available to feminists and social reformers. Indeed, many "new" feminist reform proposals, like family endowment and maternal health clinics, actually originated with Labour women in the Women's Labour League, the Women's Industrial Council and the Women's Co-Operative Guild. Thus, "Labour" historian Pat Thane denies a contradiction between feminist and Labour alliances. To this end she fashions her own definition of feminism: she considers as feminist any efforts to change the role of women in society, whether as members of single-sex groups or mixed organizations.²⁸ Similarly, "Labour" historian Christine Collette claims that feminism extends beyond a sisterhood of women who share a consciousness of oppression. She maintains that feminism is fostered by the conviction that concepts of gender assignment and role are restrictive in all aspects of life, for both men and women.²⁹ Both Thane and Collette suggest that although many female political activists chose to work within the Labour Party, they should not be dismissed as traitors to the feminist cause since there existed no viable political

alternative for pressing women's reforms.

In her recent study, Collette documents the achievements of the autonomous Women's Labour League and the implications of its amalgamation with the party in 1918. Collette maintains that Labour women were motivated by socialist feminist concerns and sensibly chose to work within the Labour Party. While she agrees that the WLL's integration was inevitable, Collette regrets that its leadership failed to negotiate an influential role for women's organizations within the 1918 Labour constitution. She characterizes the WLL as having two main periods, with a policy shift occurring after 1911 with the deaths of Margaret MacDonald and Mary Middleton. Attention during the first phase was directed towards assisting the health and welfare of working-class women in the home. After 1911, as the leadership was assumed by professional women and trade unionists, such as Dr. Marion Phillips, and Margaret Bondfield, greater priority was given to the needs of industrial women. This latter period also demarcated a growing sense of class solidarity within the WLL as League women and Labour men worked together to improve workplace conditions and advocate peace. In 1918, the WLL merged with the Labour Party because given women's enfranchisement, a separate female organization seemed outmoded.³⁰ With some irony, Collette remarks that the mother and baby phase of the WLL was more autonomous than the later trade unionist phase, under the leadership of single,

working women.

While the Marxist feminist Sheila Rowbotham criticized the WLL for its lack of socialist commitment, Collette maintains that the WLL did embody a socialist feminist ideology. League members hoped that socialism would rectify all forms of oppression, including gender and economic inequalities. Like the Labour Party, the WLL was constitutionalist, and condemned revolutionary means. However, their passive tactics should not bely their socialism.³¹ Nevertheless, Collette admits that WLL members were overly optimistic regarding the new constitution. With party amalgamation, class consciousness took priority over feminist issues and the former WLL was reduced to advisory committees like the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organizations. In addition, women party members joined special women's sections and attended separate women's conferences, whose recommendations went unnoticed by the Party's National Executive Committee.³²

Similiarly, Pat Thane defends the feminist motives of Labour women, and contends that although their achievements appear limited, they should be assessed in light of the Party's domination by conservative trade unionists and the general decline of the women's movement in the interwar period. She does not suggest that women's needs could have been better served by another political party, as the "Liberal" school contends, or by an alternative policial

system, as the Marxist feminist Rowbotham maintains. In her recent article, Thane offers a positive assessment of women's involvement in the Labour Party. Her work is a response to Harold Smith's argument that Labour women were indifferent to British feminists and the women's movement. While Smith describes feminists as members of women's activist groups, Thane contends that the majority of Labour women were feminists, "on any but a very narrow definition of the term" based on "the coherence of their analysis of women's role in society, and their strategies for change."³³ In accordance with Collette and against critics like Smith and Rowbotham, Thane defends the feminist objectives of Labour women and their choice to work within a mixed-sex political organization. She does not see any contradiction between Labour party politics and feminism, and maintains that the reform agenda of Labour women resembled that of "new" feminist ameliorative policies. During the interwar period Labour women engaged in the debates concerning the roles of women in society. For example, Labour women insisted that women should be able to choose whether to remain in the home or in the labour market. They recognized, however, that most women were wives and mothers, and that domestic work was equal to work outside the home.³⁴

As evidence of their feminist position, Thane maintains that Labour women opposed the marriage bar in the teaching and civil service professions and advocated equal pay.

Pressure for increased public birth control information was initiated by Labour women, and Eleanor Rathbone's campaign for family allowances in the 1920s was supported by Labour's Women's Sections.³⁵

Thane rightly insists that Labour women must be considered within their historical context, and should not be assessed by contemporary definitions of feminism. Vastly outnumbered by the trades union members, Labour women nonetheless advocated welfare policies to assist women in the workplace and the home. And while "welfare feminism" is often denigrated for its failure to attack traditional gender roles, Thane correctly asserts that Labour women were no doubt adopting the most pragmatic approach available, considering the economic depression and the general interwar hostility to feminism.³⁶

As the preceding discussion has attempted to illustrate, the current historiography of British interwar feminism may be subdivided into three opposing schools: Marxist feminist, "Liberal" and "Labour". Rowbotham's Marxist feminist analysis is similar to that offered by Marxist historian Ralph Miliband for the working-class and Labour movement.³⁷ As the radical socialists in Miliband's study were co-opted by party politics, so the feminist critique of male-centred society was diluted by women's admission to the conventional political process. Both Miliband and Rowbotham criticize Labour's Fabian gradualism and its ideological

incompatibility with Marxist revolutionary socialism. However, revolutionary socialist feminism offered no practical alternative. Like the women in the Labour Party, feminists working within the SDF and later the British Communist Party also faced male indifference.³⁸ And given their frustration and alienation from party politics, some radical socialist feminists, like Stella Browne, turned their efforts to single issue campaigns, such as birth control.³⁹ Others, including Sylvia Pankhurst and Maude Brown, redirected their energies from specifically feminist issues to more general causes, such as the organization of unemployed workers' protests and the anti-fascist movement.⁴⁰

Given the apparent difficulties feminists experienced within radical mixed leftist groups, Rowbotham's faith in socialist feminism as a viable political strategy appears questionable. For example, although Rowbotham championed Sylvia Pankhurst's socialist feminist convictions, immediately after the war Pankhurst herself stressed the importance of class over gender issues. The name change of her East-End publication, from the Women's to the Worker's Dreadnought, indicates Pankhurst's shifting priorities. And as a member of the CPGB, Pankhurst dedicated the remainder of her life to international peace, eventually travelling to Abyssinia to lend support to its struggle against Mussolini.⁴¹ While Pankhurst's life-long political dedication and idealism cannot be denied, her lasting contributions to socialist

feminism appear more dubious. Rowbotham's assessment of Stella Browne's continued socialist feminism is more convincing. Unlike Pankhurst, Browne continued to address women's specific needs. As an early advocate of birth control, she claimed that to gain true political and social freedom women must first have control over their own bodies. However, as Rowbotham states, Browne disassociated herself from organized left-wing groups. Instead, she turned to Labour women and "new" feminists to garner support for her birth control campaign. In fact, in 1923, the same year she resigned from the CPGB, Browne prompted Labour feminists, such as Dora Russell and Dorothy Jewson, to take up the birth control cause.⁴² Ironically, although socialist feminists like Stella Browne advocated radical socialism, they relied on Labour women and "new" feminists for support. Thus, it appears that during the twenties, revolutionary socialist feminists were either converted to radical class-based politics, as in the case of Sylvia Pankhurst, or merged with Labour women's "new" feminists, as did Stella Browne. Unfortunately, the "partial and utopian" vision of pre-war socialist feminism remained exactly that.⁴³ During the twenties, the opposing strategies of liberal equal rights feminists and Labour social reformers dominated the debates surrounding women's political issues, while the socialist feminist position grew increasingly marginalized.

This marginalization of socialist feminism is equally

apparent in the declining influence of the Marxist feminist school within the current historiographic debate. It is well known that during the 1960s and early 1970s, and with the emergence of the intellectual "new left," Marxist scholarship dominated British labour history. The developing field of women's history also drew on the Marxist paradigm, as feminist historians established theoretical connections between women's sexual and economic oppression, patriarchy and capitalism.⁴⁴ However, the Marxist feminist analysis founders over the difficulty that Robin Millar Jacoby identified earlier: that of reconciling the revolutionary potential of both feminism and class consciousness without the one minimizing the other. In addition, sociologist Michele Barrett asserts that Marxist feminism fails to account for the transhistorical character of women's oppression in non-capitalist societies, or the complexities of cultural constructions of gender.⁴⁵ In addition, Marxist feminism suffers from the same possible shortcoming of the Marxist analysis as presented by Miliband and E.P. Thompson. Respectively, both paradigms display the tendency to over-estimate the radical potential of the women's and the Labour movements. Evidently, while Marxist feminism offered important insights for historians of women and labour during the 1970s, its current impact has declined given its theoretical inconsistencies. In addition, the retreat from the Marxist feminist model stems from the growing

disenchantment among scholars with left-wing politics and the overwhelming political conservatism of the Thatcher years.

Consequently, the dominant opposing camps within the current critical discourse derive from the more moderate positions of "Liberal" and "Labour". The "Liberals", Pugh, Harrison and Smith, emphasize the essentially classless nature of feminism and its natural compatibility with the equally classless progressive liberalism. They suggest that although many women supported the Labour Party, they received little in return. Indeed, Pugh and Smith contend that the national party leadership consistently ignored women's reform proposals.

In light of Labour women's struggle to gain official Party recognition for their reforms, Smith and Pugh's demarcation between "loyalists" or "Labour women" and "feminists" appears accurate. However, in either case, both refer to only a handful of outspoken Labour women, whose views as party "loyalists" or "feminists" represent extreme ends of Labour women's political spectrum. While it is incorrect to assume that the rank and file female membership wholeheartedly accepted the class priorities of Phillips and Bondfield, it is equally misleading to suggest that outspoken feminists like Dora Russell represented any general feminist commitment on the part of Labour's working women. No doubt the "feminist demands" of Labour activists were marginalized by "orthodox leaders of both sexes." However, in some

instances, such as the debates over protective industrial legislation and the election of female NEC representatives, rank and file members supported the party "loyalists." As Robin Miller Jacoby and Sally Alexander point out, to date no in-depth study addresses the level of feminist commitment among the general female membership, and inevitably any conclusions drawn rely on both current and historical definitions of feminism.⁴⁶

Brian Harrison offers a more positive interpretation of female Labour leaders. While they cannot be considered feminists, the political careers of women like Lawrence, Wilkinson and Bondfield furthered the women's movement simply by their successful entry into public life. However, few historians of either the "Liberal" or "Labour" school would look upon Bondfield so kindly. As Ramsay MacDonald's Minister of Labour from 1929-31, she is associated with the unemployment crisis and the disastrous Anomalies Bill which virtually cut off unemployment benefits to married women. In addition, Bondfield was alienated from the Labour Party given her support of MacDonald's National government, although she did not serve in the Coalition. Harrison brushes these issues aside as merely the unfortunate end to an otherwise successful career. Against the criticism of Rowbotham and in defence of his "prudent revolutionaries," particularly Eleanor Rathbone, Harrison posits that "new" social reform feminism represented the best course available

to feminists in the twenties. However, while "Labour" historians identify "new" feminism with Labour politics, Harrison contends that in reality "new" feminism derived from progressive Liberalism.

Ironically, the "Labour" school is as hesitant as the "Liberals" to attribute feminist convictions to Labour women. Thane avoids attaching feminist motives to the actions of prominent female Labour leaders, including Bondfield and Lawrence, who consistently maintained that rank and file Labour women should address class issues, and not specifically women's concerns. Yet Thane refutes the "Liberal" theory that Labour women rejected feminism given their participation in women's reform campaigns. However, it appears that, like the "Liberals," Thane distinguishes between the feminist motives of outspoken activists and female rank and file members and the apparent conservatism of the female Labour leadership. While it must be remembered that Labour members like Bondfield and Lawrence spoke the language of class and not gender, there still remains the contentious issue of attaching feminist motives to the actions of Labour women in general.

Collette's account of the WLL addresses present-day difficulties within the Labour Party, and she expresses frustration at continued gender discrimination in the party. For example, the Labour women's conference still meets separately and still cannot direct resolutions to the general

Party conference. Her study of the WLL examines an autonomous and feminist organization. Yet she does not criticize WLL members for their party merger, and unlike Rowbotham Collette accepts the necessity of working within a political party to effect socialist change. However, Collette regrets that the wartime WLL leadership under Phillips and Bondfield demanded no special provisions for women in the party constitution, provisions that might have ensured that women's voices would be heard. Yet, based on their consistent belief in party and class unity and the dangers of difference-based politics, it appears unrealistic to expect either Phillips or Bondfield to demand concessions for women within the new party constitution. Caroline Rowan points out that Phillips was able to engineer the Party takeover of the WLL and determined the terms of the amalgamation because of the undemocratic power structure of the WLL. Had the WLL been organized on different lines, with more consultation with local branches, the terms of the merger might have reflected the wishes of the WLL membership instead of a non-feminist leader.⁴⁷

Historians agree that the inter-war demise of feminist politics was exacerbated by ideological divisions within the women's movement. However, their own analyses have preferred strategies and are no less divided. It might be argued that historians have over-emphasized both the possibility and necessity of women's political and ideological consensus. This perception stems from historians' awareness of women's

shared sexual discrimination and the realization that men and women of similar economic standing experience class differently.⁴⁸ However, instead of trying to speculate which political course might have best served post-suffrage women or which activists truly represented feminist aspirations, historians should accept that the ideological divisions within the women's movement were the product of long-standing and unavoidable differences of interest, class and ideology. Likewise, the mobilization of the inter-war women's movement also depended on the acceptance of ideological differences and the need to develop effective political strategies based on common goals. Unfortunately, this was not the case. As the debate over protective legislation illustrates, instead of co-operating, women's organizations often worked at cross purposes and frequently undermined one another's initiatives.

Notes

1. Veronica Beechey, "Women and Production: A Critical Analysis of Some Sociological Theories of Women's Work", in Feminism and Materialism (London, 1977), 156.

2. Sheila Rowbotham, Hidden From History (London, 1972), ix, x.

3. Harold Smith, "Sex vs. Class: British Feminists and the Labour Movement, 1919-29", Historian (1985), 19-37; Brian Harrison, Prudent Revolutionaries: Portraits of British Feminists Between the Wars (Oxford, 1987); Martin Pugh, Women and Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1959 (London, 1992).

4. Christine Collette, For Labour and For Women: The Women's Labour League, 1906-1918 (Manchester, 1989); Pat Thane, "The Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism, 1906-1945" in British Feminism in the Twentieth Century, ed.

Harold Smith (Amherst, Mass., 1990).

5. Robin Miller Jacoby, "Feminism and Class Consciousness in the British and American Women's Trade Union Leagues, 1890- 1925", in Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays ed. Berenice A . Carroll (Chicago, 1976), 135.

6. Miller Jacoby, "Feminism and Class Consciousness," 135-137.

7. For the Marxist feminist perspective: Sheila Rowbotham, Women, Resistance and Revolution (London, 1972), 11-12; Angela Weir and Elizabeth Wilson, "The British Women's Movement", New Left Review, 148 (November/December, 1984), 78-80. For the "Labour" view: Pat Thane, "The Women of the British Labour Party and Feminism 1906-1945", British Feminism in the Twentieth Century, ed. Harold Smith (Amherst, Massachusetts, 1990), 124-126.

8. Rowbotham, Hidden From History, ix, x.

9. Ibid., 94.

10. Ibid., 161.

11. Ibid., 88-89, 114-115.

12. Harrison, Revolutionaries, 216.

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Chapter Two:

Parallel Strategies: Liberal and Social Reformist Feminism

Ideological debates between rival activist groups undermined the strength of the post-suffrage women's movement. However, feminist debates over political strategy and reform priorities were certainly not unique to the twenties. Indeed, they characterize feminist politics since the late-nineteenth century. The Victorian and Edwardian women's movement was bisected by two rival ideologies--liberalism and socialism. Although these two groups often shared similar goals, such as obtaining the franchise for women, their common objectives should not bely their fundamental ideological differences. The suffrage campaign's demand for political rights unified feminist activists. However, after women's partial enfranchisement in 1918, tensions between liberal and social reformist feminists resumed as women activists redefined their agendas. The feminist debates of the twenties were complicated further by disputes between the proponents of "new" and "old" feminism, and the additional competing demands of party and class loyalty towards mixed political organizations, such as the Labour Party. To better comprehend both the contemporary debates between liberal and social reform feminists during the twenties and the current critical discourse, it is necessary to discuss briefly these two competing political streams in relation to Victorian feminism and women's early involvement in the Labour movement.

The early Victorian women's movement, like the early Labour movement, was predominantly a middle-class phenomenon with its membership drawn from the professional and upper-middle classes. Influenced by the feminist writings of Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill's classical liberalism, mid-nineteenth century feminists asserted that political and

legal equality for women was a natural right.¹ The social critique of Victorian feminists drew heavily on the liberal ideological principles of freedom and individualism; feminists used these fundamental tenets to challenge patriarchal control in the home and in parliament. Early equalitarian feminists active in the late 1850s, such as Harriet Taylor Mill and the members of Barbara Leigh Smith's Langham Place Group, believed that sex should not effect public and private rights. They demanded an end to male social and economic privilege, and to this purpose lobbied for the franchise, marriage and property law reform and women's access to higher education and the professions.² Given their ideological ties to liberalism, the petitions of equalitarian feminists were usually presented in parliament by sympathetic Liberals, notably John Stewart Mill and later, Henry Fawcett.³ The women's protests against systemic discrimination also challenged the Victorian medical discourse which labelled women physically and mentally inferior as justification of the denial of women's full political and legal rights. They maintained that if women were intellectually and bodily inferior, it was because they were denied the opportunities given to men. In this way, equalitarian feminists implied that gender inequalities were socially constructed and not determined entirely by innate biology.⁴

Although mid-Victorian feminists drew important connections between women's inequality--domestic, legal and economic--and male political control, they failed to criticize patriarchal society in its entirety. Liberal feminists accepted the maternalist position that motherhood constituted women's most important role, and that women were essentially different from men. Liberal suffragists, like Frances Power Cobbe, argued that because women mothered, they were more caring and more nurturant than men. Given women's compassionate nature, they were entitled to political

representation since they could offer skills and understanding of particular relevance to the state. In addition, Victorian feminists maintained that women should be given adequate recognition for their maternal function, and they based their campaigns for marriage law reform on this premise.⁵ Despite their praise of maternity, liberal feminists asserted that above all, women should be free to choose their own destinies and that those who remained single could have useful productive lives if given suitable education and employment opportunities.⁶

On the assumption that working-class and middle-class women faced the same problems in terms of their mutual subjection to husbands and restrictive legislation, Victorian middle-class feminists believed that their demand for absolute equality would serve the interests of all English women. For example, middle-class feminists, such as Josephine Butler and Millicent Fawcett, lobbied on behalf of their less fortunate sisters for women's equal access to all forms of employment. Consequently, equal rights feminists disputed the need for prevailing sex-based protective industrial legislation on the grounds that it contravened a woman's individual right to choose any occupation, and legitimized the gender workplace segregation which they so adamantly opposed. Instead of seeking special protection, the equalitarian feminists insisted that labouring women should strive for equal trade union representation.⁷

Given this fundamental disagreement over industrial legislation, during the 1880s the assumption that middle-class and working women shared similar forms of oppression came to be challenged by other women active in the socialist and labour movements.⁸ As in the case of the labour movement as a whole, feminists began in the 1880s to rediscover the distinct socialist perspective of the early-nineteenth century. Socialist feminism, the second intellectual

tradition of the Victorian women's movement, derived from communitarian socialism, particularly the Owenite Movement of the 1820s and 1830s. Scottish industrialist Robert Owen identified three sources of social disunity--religion, marriage and private property. Owen envisioned a harmonious society in which competitive capitalism was replaced by the communal ownership of property, and class divisions were dissolved by mutual co-operation between workers. Of significance to feminism was Owen's belief that marriage perpetuated gender inequality since it converted women into male property.

Owen's followers, notably William Thompson and Anna Wheeler, extended his original views on marriage and communitarianism to a more comprehensive critique of women's social and sexual subordination. In 1825, Thompson published The Appeal of One-Half the Human Race in which he advocated female enfranchisement and gender equality.⁹ Female emancipation became an important aspect of Owenite theory, based on the notion that social evolution from "savagery to civilization" could be measured by the status women. This theory derived from the early nineteenth-century French socialist, Charles Fournier, who posited that "social progress and changes of period are brought about by virtue of the progress of women towards liberty, and social retrogression occurs as a result of a diminution in the liberty of women."¹⁰ Like Fournier, Owenite socialists perceived female emancipation as a sign of social enlightenment--the triumph of human goodness over injustice and brutality. However, in addition to this utopian ideology, Owenite socialists, like Frances and James Morrison, supported practical strategies to assist labouring women, such as trade union organization to regulate women's wages and improve conditions in the workplace.¹¹

Although this "first wave" of socialist feminism

suffered with the decline of Owenite socialism in the early 1840s, it resurfaced with the socialist revival and new unionism in the 1880s. The establishment of the Fabian Movement in 1884, whose membership included Sydney and Beatrice Webb and George Bernard Shaw, exemplifies middle-class conversion to socialism. The Fabians supported gradual social reconstruction via constitutional changes and ameliorative government reforms. Some middle-class socialists, notably artist William Morris, supported more direct and violent action against capitalism. He considered capitalism "morally repugant" since it hampered human creativity and advocated social reconstruction through revolution.¹² H.M Hyndman formed the Social Democratic Party in 1883; like Morris, the SDF endorsed revolutionary means. The economic hardships of the 1880's compounded the growing realization that neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives genuinely represented the political interests of working people and may account for the renewed interest in socialism among the skilled and semi-skilled artisan classes. The creation of the Independent Labour Party in 1893 answered the call for a socialist party which reflected the needs of the labouring classes.¹³

Socialist rhetoric held forth the promise of a just and humane society. For feminists like Eleanor Marx of the SDF and ILP members and trade union activists, Enid Stacy and Isabella Ford, social reconstruction meant sexual equality. In contrast to the liberal feminists, who anticipated legal and constitutional amendments as the means of achieving female emancipation, socialist feminists in the labour movement envisioned the elimination of both gender and class hierarchies under a state-directed, co-operative system of government.

Despite ideological differences, socialist feminists shared similar immediate goals with their middle-class

liberal contemporaries. For example, as an ILP organizer, Stacey spoke in favour of legal gender equality regarding divorce, guardianship, women's right to work, and the franchise.¹⁴ However, Victorian liberal and socialist feminists differed profoundly over the contentious issue of women's protective legislation. Against the protests of liberal feminists, socialist feminists, like Stacey, supported sex-based legislation for women workers to improve wages, working conditions, and the health of industrial women.¹⁵ According to Ellen Mappen, activists involved with the labour movement and new unionism claimed that, given their experience with working women, they were better qualified than the egalitarian feminists to assess the needs of working-class women. Many of the new union feminists like Stacey and Ford were ILP members; others such as Clementina Black, belonged to the Fabian socialists. Socialist feminists were instrumental in the establishment of labour organizations during the late 1880s, including the Women's Trade Union Association (WTUA) and the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL).¹⁶

Traditionally, male trade unionists assumed a negative position towards the claims of women workers. Male trades unionists believed that unskilled women usurped jobs from skilled men. Evidence of this trend towards sexual competition has been found as early as the clothing industry of the 1830s where contracts to male journeymen tailors were undercut by female "slop" workers paid at miserable piecerates. In response and in hope of eliminating female competition, working women were restricted from organized trades unions and working men demanded a "living wage" so that their wives and children need not work.¹⁷ This attitude prevailed throughout much of the nineteenth century. By the 1880s, however, feminist organizations like the WTUA, later the Women's Industrial Council (WIC) and the WTUL were

established in response to women's traditional exclusion from male organizations. These women's labour associations were not unions in themselves but advisory groups which assisted labouring women in forming their own unions and pressured politicians for improved industrial protection.¹⁷ The WIC addressed conditions of home piece-work or "sweating," protective legislation, women's health insurance and maternity benefits, domestic economy and childcare. In this sense, the WIC addressed the needs of working women both in the workplace and in the home. Although the WIC was primarily a non-aligned organization, it was staffed by prominent, politically active members of the women's and socialist movements including the Fabians Barbara Drake and Clementina Black and ILP members Isabella Ford, Gertrude Tuckwell and Margaret MacDonald.¹⁸

In retrospect, the issue of protective legislation became a recurring theme within the women's movement. This issue continually polarized liberal and social reformist feminists and the resulting debates are discussed at length in chapters three and four. While the efficacy of protective legislation divided the Victorian women's movement, disputes over the means to achieve women's equality profoundly affected the Edwardian suffrage campaign. Generally, liberal feminists merely opposed the sex-bias of the property qualification. As in the previous century, liberal suffragists, such as Millicent Fawcett, justified votes for women on the dual arguments of women's individual rights as citizens and their higher moral capacity as the nurturing sex. Liberal suffragists saw no contradiction in these two approaches which combined maternalist sentiments with classical Liberalism. They reasoned that female enfranchisement could "humanize the political process," and that by advancing women's political agenda they could actually break down the traditional barriers between home and

state.¹⁹

The history of the Edwardian women's movement has been dominated by the liberal suffrage campaign. However, the resurgence of feminist trades unionism after the failure of new unionism, and its importance to the suffrage movement, has received much less attention. Through their trade union activity, feminists in the Labour movement realized that the improvement of women's work situation ultimately depended on their political equality.²⁰

The suffrage campaign coincided with this second wave of women's trade unionism, as prominent Labour feminists participated in both movements simultaneously. In 1906, ILP member Mary MacArthur formed the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW). An offshoot of the WTUL, the NFWW was a general union open to all women belonging to unorganized trades or not admitted by men to their appropriate union. Under MacArthur, the NFWW supported women's enfranchisement under a universal adult suffrage scheme.²¹ Although the NFWW preferred adult suffrage, the leadership of the WIC actively supported women's suffrage and its prominent members, including Black, Ford and Tuckwell, held memberships with Fawcett's NUWSS.²²

While the WIC remained a non-political advisory group, the Women's Labour League (WLL) was a direct affiliate of the Labour Party. The WLL maintained important connections with women's trade unionism, ILP members Isabella Ford and Mary MacArthur were active in the NFWW, the WTUL and the WLL. In addition, the WLL initiated ameliorative projects for working-class women and children, including baby clinics, school meals and regular medical inspections. Like its parent organization, the Labour Party and under Margaret MacDonald's leadership, the WLL officially supported adult suffrage. However, many WLL members, such as Ada Neild Chew, Teresa Billington-Greig, Ethel Snowden and Katherine Bruce Glasier

actively supported women's suffrage, and grew impatient with Labour's latent interest in female enfranchisement.²³

Evidently feminists in the Labour movement supported votes for women, although they were divided over the actual terms of the franchise. Some promoted universal adult suffrage while others accepted the liberals' plan of partial enfranchisement as one step closer to the ideal. Thus, despite fundamental ideological differences, the women's suffrage campaign suggests an unparalleled level of cooperation between women of varying political sympathies and class origins. For example, despite their socialist convictions, the working-class Lancashire suffragists, lead by mill worker Selina Cooper, advocated women's suffrage, and joined forces with Fawcett's NUWSS. In the early 1900's, and as a member of the ILP, Cooper appealed to the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) and the ILP for their support of women's suffrage. Although Cooper won the allegiance of several prominent ILP members, including Keir Hardie and Phillip Snowden, after considerable debate at its 1905 conference, both the ILP and the LRC voted in favour of adult suffrage, and not simply the extension of the vote to women on existing property qualifications.²⁴

Following this strategic defeat at the Labour conference and given their constitutionalist stance, Cooper's working-class, Lancashire suffragists affiliated with the NUWSS, an umbrella group of middle-class egalitarian associations. Equally disaffected after the 1905 defeat of the women's suffrage motion, Emmeline Pankhurst's militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), which also originated with the Manchester ILP, severed its labour connections. Based on their common origins in the Labour movement, Cooper's suffragists and the WSPU seemed logical allies. However, the Lancashire women opposed the WSPU's aggressive tactics, indifference to working-class women and autocratic

structure. In addition, the Lancashire suffragists wished to maintain their ties with labour politics, the WSPU did not.²⁵ Throughout the women's suffrage campaign, up until 1914, working-class suffragists, like Cooper and Ethel Derbyshire, attracted labouring women to the cause via their connections with trade groups, such as the WTUL and working-class women's organizations, like the Women's Co-Operative Guild.²⁶

Thus, despite political differences the suffrage campaign united liberal equal rights feminists with feminists active in the labour movement. The suffrage campaign was also characterized by inter-class cooperation, as demonstrated by the Lancashire suffragists' affiliation to Fawcett's middle-class NUWSS. To a large extent, historians attribute this cooperation to the pervasive influence of maternalist arguments for women's suffrage.²⁷ Like Fawcett's liberal suffragists, Labour women, including Margaret MacDonald, claimed that women could better fulfill their duties in the home if they participated in "civic life."²⁸ Similarly, Ethel Snowden commented that "because the special sphere of woman is the home, women ought to have the vote." Yet, she felt that feminism would never displace women's "natural and beautiful instinct towards life-giving and life-protecting."²⁹ Thus, maternalist arguments for women's enfranchisement and the shared critique of women's legal and sexual subordination underscored the feminist notion of collective gender interests which transcended those of class and party politics. Nevertheless, as Seth Koven and Sonya Michel point out, "maternalism proved a fragile foundation on which to build coalitions."³⁰ Despite the common suffrage goal, women were still deeply divided on many key issues, as the post-suffrage feminist debates over reform policies and political strategy aptly illustrate.

However, even before the suffrage victory, the outbreak of World War I undermined gender solidarity by interrupting

the suffrage campaign and exacerbating class tensions. Divisions over support for the war effort and the resulting growth of working-class solidarity within the labour movement minimized the possibility of continued inter-class cooperation between liberal and labour feminists. After August 1914, the suffragist campaign was suspended and Millicent Fawcett redirected NUWSS efforts towards war relief work at home and abroad. According to Sandra Holton, Fawcett hoped that relief work would accommodate both patriots and pacifists and therefore prevent a split within the NUWSS ranks over the contentious issue of support for the war. Although patriotism motivated much of the NUWSS war work, the feminist objective of the NUWSS was not completely overshadowed given its wartime investigations into the social, economic and industrial concerns of women. In contrast, the militant suffragette WSPU, under the firm control of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, abandoned its feminist stance and ardently supported the war, to the degree that it assisted with government recruiting and participated in the white feather campaign.³¹

Although the war interrupted the suffrage campaign, and divided pacifist and patriotic feminists, it strengthened women's position in the labour movement. For example, Labour activists, like Mary MacArthur, encouraged women workers to join trade unions while the WLL increased its affiliations with women's trade unions. The latter change could be attributed to the influence of the League's new leaders, Marion Phillips and Margaret Bondfield, both of whom were interested in such women's occupational concerns, as unionization and equal pay.³² Given the wartime recruitment of vast numbers of women into the workforce, and the consequential expansion of female trade unions, the increased focus on employed women is not surprising.³³ Both Bondfield and Phillips sat on the Central Committee for Women's

Employment, a body created to safeguard the interests of women workers. In 1916, Phillips, Beatrice Webb and Mary MacArthur founded the Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organizations (SJC). The SJC represented delegates from the NFWW and WTUL, the WLL and the Women's Co-Operative Guild, thereby linking trade unionism, politics and co-operation.³⁴ Chaired by MacArthur, the SJC became the main lobbyist for women in industry. For example, it pressured the government to legislate wage increases for substituted women. In addition, the SJC supported increased protective legislation for women workers and protested against the conditions endured by female munitions workers, including the extension of overtime work and women's unregulated exposure to toxic substances.³⁵ After the war, the SJC remained an important advisory body. However, politically, it drew closer to Labour, becoming the Party's official committee on women's issues. After 1918, the four female members of Labour's National Executive Committee also sat on the SJC executive. Because the four women representatives were elected by male delegates at the annual Labour Party Conference, the SJC relinquished its former autonomy and its position on industrial issues reflected not only that of organized women, but of the Labour Party generally. As a result of this administrative overlap, the SJC addressed the needs of working women in terms of class and not gender, under the assumption that industrial women's problems "resulted from class rather than sex conflicts."³⁶

The growing emphasis on class over gender politics among working-class women's groups has been attributed to the effects of the First World War. Women's increased participation in the workforce and their growing unionization helped develop a sense of solidarity with working men, despite male animosity towards female competition and confrontations over dilution and pay equity.³⁷ In addition,

working-class women were affected most by the domestic exigencies of wartime, like food shortages, inflationary prices and rent hikes, and as the conflict dragged on, working-class women protested the "inequality of sacrifice" because the majority of wartime casualties were members of their class.³⁸

While the hardships of the war fostered a sense of profound discontent among working-class men and women, the franchise act of 1918 offered the possibility of real political change. With the extension of the vote to millions of previously unrepresented men and women for the first time, labouring people made up the majority of the electorate. As the party of the working people, Labour expected to gain the most support from the widened franchise. Amid this surge of post-war optimism, Labour placed high expectations on the power of class politics and its inevitable impact on social reconstruction. Thus, the notion of separate gender interests was easily submerged beneath the faith in class unity and the hopes for positive social change.

Certainly, the wartime interruption of the women's suffrage campaign and the growth of class antagonism weakened the pre-war alliances between middle-class feminists and working women's groups.³⁹ After women's partial enfranchisement and given the increasing influence of class politics and internal disputes over feminist reform strategies, the feminist movement failed to recover the momentum of the Edwardian period. The women's movement experienced an ideological schism during the 1920s: the separation of "old" egalitarian feminists from the "new" welfare feminists. The division originated with the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship (NUSEC), formerly the suffragist NUWSS. Under Millicent Fawcett, the organization focused on women's enfranchisement. Given the partial franchise in 1918, the NUSEC's new leader, Eleanor

Rathbone, broadened the traditional mandate from the pursuit of political and economic equality with men to the implementation of ameliorative reforms which addressed women's needs as wives and mothers. Rathbone herself made the distinction between "old" and "new" feminism in a 1925 address to the NUSEC. "New" feminists felt that the traditional suffragist emphasis on political equality failed to address the "real" needs of ordinary working and lower-class women. The "new" feminists advocated welfare programs to assist women in the home; and they supported state funded schemes for family endowment and children's school meals as recognition and payment for women's maternal duties.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, the NUSEC's policy shift was not greeted with unanimous approval. Egalitarian or "old" feminists, such as Lady Rhondda, countered that this new emphasis on ameliorative legislation defined women in terms of their reproductive function and represented a retreat from the suffragist demand for full social and economic equality. In protest, Lady Rhondda (Margaret Haig), a wealthy coal mine owner from the Rhondda Valley, established the Six Point Group (SPG) in 1921. Prominent members included the writers Vera Brittain and Winifred Holtby, actress Cicely Hamilton and journalist Helen Archdale. Essentially an equal-rights feminist organization, the SPG continued the suffrage campaign to secure the vote for all women and advocated pay equity and equal employment opportunities. Lady Rhondda adamantly opposed special treatment for women workers in the form of sex-based protective legislation. The Six Point Group held that the vote alone would not bring about women's emancipation, unless women stopped defining themselves in relation to motherhood and domesticity. On this basis, Lady Rhondda opposed Rathbone's maternalist "new" feminist emphasis.⁴¹

A second "old" feminist organization, the Open Door

Council (ODC), was equally dismissive of the NUSEC's policy shift. Formed in 1926, the ODC focused specifically on work-related issues, such as equal pay and better trade union representation for women. Although the NUSEC officially disapproved of protective laws for women, in 1927 it agreed to consider the efficacy of such measures if the health of women workers was at risk or if the workers themselves supported protective laws. Disappointed at this concession, the ODC vocally attacked gender-based protective legislation, and argued that discriminatory laws eliminated employment opportunities for women. Under the leadership of Elizabeth Abbott, the ODC insisted that industrial legislation must be based on the nature of the job and not the sex of the worker. Significantly, there was a considerable overlap between the membership of the ODC and the SPG, indicating their common equal rights agenda and their shared mistrust of "new" feminism.⁴²

Yet, Rathbone's terminology is misleading. There was nothing "new" about reformist welfare feminism in terms of the women's labour movement.⁴³ What was "new" was the NUSEC's priority shift from women's political equality to difference-based social programs which resembled the pre-war socialist feminism of the WLL and the WIC. In addition, the disputes between "new" reformist feminism and "old" equalitarian feminists may be traced to the ideological contradictions of the suffragist NUWSS, with its dual emphasis on maternalist and liberal arguments for women's enfranchisement.

This basic dichotomy effectively divided the women's movement during the 1920s. From their respective ideological positions, whether as "old" liberal equalitarians or "new" social reformists, interwar feminists disputed the post-suffrage agenda. Women in the Labour Party usually fell within this latter group, given their preoccupation with

legislative reforms to assist average women in the home and the workplace. While "old" and "new" feminists clashed over several policies, including proposals for family allowances and increased birth control information, the issue of protective legislation highlighted this growing disparity.

Several major points warrant reiteration. First, the Victorian and Edwardian women's movement was bisected by two rival ideologies, liberalism and socialism. Second, the objectives of the women's movement addressed two fundamental areas, securing the franchise for women and improving the material conditions of women's lives, whether as wives in the home or labourers in the workplace. Generally, these dual aims--gaining political rights and pressing for welfare schemes--correspond respectively to liberal and socialist feminism. However, as this chapter has attempted to show, there was considerable overlap between the goals of equal-rights suffragists and socialist feminists active in trade unionism. Indeed, the inter-class cooperation of the Edwardian women's movement is attributed to women's shared struggle for the vote.

This period of cooperation did not survive much past the war. After achieving the franchise and throughout the twenties, the women's movement became increasingly divided by class politics and ideological differences, as liberal feminists and social reformists disputed how best to use their new political "weapon" and exactly which "great tasks of social reform" should be given priority. For women active in the labour movement and many newly enfranchised working-class women, the notion of unified class interests took precedence over gender differences, as social change appeared imminent. Given the Labour Party's reconstruction rhetoric of gender equality within a socialist commonwealth, it appeared the most sympathetic to women's issues, and the logical choice for many newly-enfranchised female voters. Labour

women increasingly associated single-sex liberal feminism with a middle-class anti-labour position, while internal feminist debates revolved around "old" and "new" strategies. As stated earlier, Labour women most often fall into this latter category, despite their strained relationship with non-party single-sex organizations like the NUSEC.

Significantly, the current critical discourse among historians of British women, outlined in chapter one, parallels the contemporary debates between feminists during the twenties. Liberal feminists and social reformists, including Labour women, disputed the efficacy of difference-based legislation from opposing ideological perspectives. Likewise, the historical accounts of interwar feminism presented in this study derive from similar ideological views--those of liberalism and democratic socialism. By comparing the contemporary historical feminist debates with the current historiographic one, it is possible to identify corresponding ideological positions. Evidently political ideology underscored past definitions of feminism and feminist strategy. By the same token, political ideology influences fundamentally the current historiographic analysis of the interwar women's movement.

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Chapter Three:

Protective or "Restrictive" Legislation

The 1920s debate over sex-based industrial legislation rekindled the earlier Victorian dispute between liberal feminists and reformers active in the women's labour movement. Many of the latter group belonged to socialist organizations, such as the Fabians and the ILP, or were active trade union organizers. As in the Victorian debate, equal rights feminists condemned sex-specific legislation as discriminatory against women workers, since it contravened women's right to make individual occupational choices. On the other hand, feminists and reformers in the Labour movement insisted that industrial women needed protection from exploitative employers. Ideally, collective bargaining remained the best means of improving wages and working conditions. However, labour activists argued that given the youth and poor organization of most women workers, collective bargaining was impossible. State legislated protection offered the best immediate means of raising the working standards of labouring women and ensuring the health and safety not only of the women themselves, but of their offspring. As in the twentieth century, the Victorian debates touched a number of related issues, including women's right to work and the gendered division of work in both the public and private sphere. Fundamental to these complex questions were opposing ideological definitions of feminism and differing strategies for achieving female equality.

The evolution of interventionist industrial legislation is well documented and generally originates in the late-eighteenth century with the growing philanthropic concern over the evils of child labour. Under Lord Ashley and Richard Oastler, a Short Time Committee pressed for a factory act (1833) which placed restrictions on children's hours. While

they focused their attentions on the exploitation of the young, the reformers also hoped that a shortened day would eventually decrease the hours of all workers.¹

Although ameliorative legislation was initially directed at juveniles, the overwork and mistreatment of female workers became the focus of later campaigns. Lord Ashley's 1842 Mine Regulation Act forbade the employment of women underground; it was implemented to prevent female moral corruption and the disintegration of the family, the alleged result of female workers in the pits. Jane Humphries contends that the 1842 act is significant in that it inaugurated gender-specific legislation. For the first time the state "limited the exploitation of a class of workers on the basis of gender, a distinction which has characterized protective labour legislation ever since."² The Mine Regulation Act set an important precedent. Thereafter women, like children came under the protection of special regulations regarding hours and job assignment.³

Strong opposition to sex-based regulations did not emerge until the latter half of the nineteenth century in the form of the Women's Rights Opposition Movement (WROM). Active during the 1870's and 1880's, the movement was led by prominent equal rights feminists, like Lydia Becker of the Langham Place Group and suffragist Millicent Fawcett. The WROM grew directly from the Victorian agitation for better education and political rights for women. Feminists like Josephine Butler saw important connections between "industrial freedom" and "political freedom." She maintained the injustice of legislation that restricted women's work when women had no political voice. In a quintessential statement of egalitarian feminism, Butler described male trade unionists and politicians as "monopolists," and claimed that working women needed "justice," not misplaced "chivalry."⁴ In addition, Butler drew parallels between

women's industrial legislation and the sex-biased Contagious Diseases Acts (1866, 1868), which forced female prostitutes to undergo regular medical inspections, but left male clients untouched.⁵

The feminist opposition focused on two legislative proposals, the Factories Acts of 1874 and 1876 which restricted women's hours, and the later acts, presented in 1883 and 1886, which sought to exclude women from nailmaking and pit-brow work. Articles in the Englishwoman's Review and the Women's Suffrage Journal condemned these proposals as infringements on women's individual rights and freedoms. Outspoken equalitarian feminists felt that sex-based laws treated adult women like children in need of protection and defined women as domestic, reproductive creatures, whose place was in the home.⁶ Thus, protective legislation legally enforced the sexual division between male and female work spheres, just when feminists were striving to open new avenues of opportunity for women, especially for middle-class women in the professions.

Initially, under Emma Paterson's leadership (1874-1886), the Women's Protection and Provident League (WPPL) accepted the feminists' equal rights argument. Paterson feared that legislation would eliminate jobs for working women, jobs which women depended on to support themselves and their families. In particular, the WPPL actively campaigned against the proposed restrictions on pit brow women and nail-makers. Instead of legislated protection for labouring women, Paterson advocated "a fair field and no favour," in effect, better pay and trade unions for women to improve their status and job security.⁷ However, under the leadership of Lady Dilke, her neice Gertrude Tuckwell and Clementina Black, the WPPL eventually amalgamated with the WTUL and relinquished its laissez-faire approach to protective legislation. Significantly, the change appears to

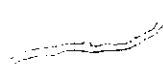
have coincided with the influx of socialist feminists and by the late 1880's, the WTUL contained a number of vocal socialist feminist organizers, including Black, Ada Neild Chew and Isabella Ford.⁸ They firmly supported protective sex-based legislation to limit women's hours and prohibit their exposure to dangerous substances such as lead. In an 1894 essay, Beatrice Webb argued that given women's inferior status in the workplace, their low pay and inadequate trade union representation, legislative measures were the only real means of improving the situation of industrial working women. It was important for middle-class women that restrictive policies be removed from the professions. However, in the case of working-class women, the absence of regulation did not mean personal freedom to choose a career, but greater possible exploitation.⁹ In addition, past experience proved that legislation originally inaugurated for women and juveniles eventually improved the conditions of male workers, as in the case of the Ten Hours Movement.¹⁰

In retrospect, the implementation of sex-specific industrial legislation was always a contentious issue between liberal feminists and female activists. However, the twentieth-century debate differs from that of previous decades for two main reasons. First, the situation of women workers had changed between the 1880s and the 1920s. For example, the sheer numbers of women in the labour force, especially the industrial sector, had expanded considerably since the turn of the century. In particular, World War I profoundly affected women's participation in paid work outside the home. Given the shortage of male labour and the expansion of wartime industries, such as munitions and military equipment manufacture, single and married women were recruited into the workforce in unprecedented numbers. According to a wartime government report, the number of women employed outside their homes rose by 1,200,000 between July 1914 and 1918.¹¹ At the

government's urging, employers and trade unions temporarily suspended the usual regulations regarding female and non-union workers. Consequently, women filled non-traditional industrial positions, particularly in the engineering trades as machinists and foundry workers in munitions production. In addition, women replaced male conscripts in the retail, transport and service industries.¹²

The expanding female labour force gave impetus to women's trade union activity during the war years. Although most male unions continued to bar women, union representatives encouraged women to join female unions. The Amalgamated Societies of Engineers (ASE) excluded women from its ranks but urged female munition workers to join Mary MacArthur's NFWW.¹³ Encouraged by women's successful entry into traditional male trades, and their demonstrated adaptability and proficiency, female trade union leaders advocated pay equity between male and female workers engaged in the same work. The wartime movement for equal pay was largely unsuccessful. However, as Harold Smith points out, it signified a partial disintegration of traditional distinctions between skilled male and unskilled female work, and challenged the Victorian notions that women were physically unfit to engage in specialized trades. As women performed jobs usually done by men, they inadvertently challenged the gender hierarchy of the labour force that existed before the war.¹⁴

The wartime expansion of occupations open to women and their increased trade unionism improved women's status in the work force. However, the experience of women's wartime employment was not entirely positive and occupational gains were temporary. For example, given the wartime pressure to meet contract deadlines, employers virtually ignored the Factory Acts. Women employed in the war industries regularly worked twelve hour shifts (the statutory limit was ten hours)



plus overtime. Night work, another prohibition for women, became the norm as employers ran double shifts to fulfil contract demands. In addition, women munition workers were often exposed to toxic substances such as TNT and contracted respiratory diseases from the inhalation of copper and lead particles. Gail Braybon suggests that employers took advantage of women's patriotism to make them work harder and endure factory conditions that would have been unacceptable in peacetime.¹⁵

Economic "normalization" characterized the reconstruction period after the war. The release of women workers from their wartime occupations was one important aspect of economic recovery. The Restitution of the Pre-War Practices Act (1918) legislated the dismissal of female dilutees, and consequently the number of women in the workforce declined. However, the ratio of male workers to female did not return to pre-war levels. Throughout the twenties, the volume of working women remained high, particularly given the "surplus" of single women after the war. Munitions work was no longer available, and women were forced to return to traditional areas such as domestic service. According to Marion Gluckmann, by the mid-twenties the expanding new industries--electrical engineering, chemicals, synthetic fibres and food processing-- offered new employment opportunities for women. However, these facts did not signal a change in managerial attitudes. In the new light industries employers favoured female workers for the same old reasons: women were cheap, inadequately organized and not averse to repetitive, routine work.¹⁶ Evidently, the gendered nature of the labour force was only temporarily disrupted by the war. Indeed, legislation like the Restitution of the Pre-War Practices Act was designed to facilitate a speedy return to the status quo.

The government devoted considerable attention to the

subject of women's work immediately after World War I. Between 1919 and 1923, seven parliamentary reports were presented by various committees including the Women's Employment Committee Report (1919) and the War Cabinet Committee's investigation, Women in Industry. (1919).¹⁷ The Women's Employment Report considered opportunities for women gained during their war work experience, and concluded that, given better training, wages and organization, women could participate in a wide range of occupations. In particular, the report endorsed female employment in light industry, and stressed that all clerical posts in the civil service should be open equally to men and women. However, the Committee condemned the wartime relaxation of regulations in "unsuitable and dangerous trades" and recommended that the government should determine "which trades were suitable or unsuitable for women." In addition, the Committee stressed that married women should not be encouraged to work away from their homes, and called for an enquiry into the relation between infant mortality and mothers' occupations.¹⁸

Although Britain experienced a brief economic boom immediately following the war, by 1920 the prospect of full economic recovery had vanished.¹⁹ In a time of rising unemployment, male trades unionists and politicians accused women workers of taking jobs from male "breadwinners," and therefore, women should assume some responsibility for the unemployment crisis. In particular, married women were criticized by the unions. In some professions, such as teaching and the civil service, a marriage bar was introduced.²⁰ According to a study by Jane Lewis, public attitudes disapproved of women, especially married women, accepting work outside the home.²¹ In addition, some women's organizations, such as the Women's Co-Operative Guild and an association of working-class wives, endorsed restrictions on married women's work.²² Although economic exigencies left

many single and widowed women no choice but to support themselves and their dependants, female participation in the workplace was considered an unfortunate necessity. Marriage and childrearing were still regarded as women's primary occupations, particularly given the anti-feminist sentiment of the reconstruction era. Thus, working women were accused of taking men's jobs and neglecting their domestic responsibilities.²³

Considered in context, the issue of protective legislation during the inter-war period was one aspect of the wider social debate over women's work and role in society. Granted, the nineteenth-century debate over industrial legislation was framed by the discourse of the "woman question." However, discussions during the 1920s were intensified by anxieties over an expanding female labour force, the interwar economic slump and the anti-feminist backlash which followed women's suffrage.

The presence of an organized feminist movement in the 1920s constitutes the second fundamental difference between the nineteenth and twentieth century debates over industrial legislation. As a result of the long suffrage campaign, generally from 1904 to 1918, women activists were skilled political lobbyists. The pamphlet war of the 1920s, between the equal rights feminists in the Open Door Council and the Labour backed Standing Joint Committee of Industrial Women's Organizations, suggests a level of political activity that far exceeded feminist capabilities in the previous century.

In addition, the influence of feminism was deemed partially responsible for the influx of women, especially middle-class women into the labour market. Alarmed at the declining birth rate among middle and upper-class families, politicians feared that the feminist movement lured women away from their maternal responsibilities into careers and competition with men.²⁴ This had the dual negative impact of

taking jobs from men and weakening the strength of the British race, since the less healthy working classes continued to have large families. Advocates of professional marriage bars often used such anti-feminist arguments to limit women's access to work outside the home.²⁵

In part, the mid-twenties feminist campaign against protective legislation led by the Open Door Council, an offshoot of the NUSEC, was motivated by the growing white-collar prejudice against the employment of married middle-class women. Nineteenth-century feminists also opposed protective legislation given its possible negative implications for women entering the professions, particularly at a time when women were just gaining access to non-traditional careers, such as medicine. However, by the 1920s, middle-class feminists condemned protective legislation in light of the imposed marriage bars which threatened to restrict women's access to the professions they had recently fought hard to enter. The protective legislation debates of the 1890s and the 1920s bear important similarities. The modern debate was intensified, however, by the post World War I discourse surrounding women's work and the impact of middle-class feminism.

As in the previous century, the mid-twenties dispute over women and protective legislation centred around proposed changes to existing factory regulations. Two specific pieces of legislation provided the focal point--revisions to the Factory Act, and a bill restricting the use of lead paint. While both proposals contained clauses of relevance to male and female workers, they also outlined restrictions that applied specifically to women and juveniles (workers under eighteen years of age.)

After World War I trade union representatives and Labour politicians were anxious to revise the 1901 Factory Act. Both groups hoped to consolidate minor amendments and implement

new international standards for safety and hours.²⁶ The 1919 Washington Convention of the International Labour Organization recommended a 48 hour week, overtime limitations and the prohibition of night work in some occupations. The 1921 Geneva Convention recommended tighter controls over the use of toxins in the workplace and advocated a ban on the use of white lead paint.²⁷ British delegates representing employers and workers signed the Washington and Geneva proposals; therefore, Labour expected the British government to ratify the agreements.

Yet despite the alleged commitment to revise factory legislation by Labour and Conservative politicians, the 1901 law remained unchanged until 1937. While several factory bills were presented in the House of Commons, factory reform was repeatedly delayed for various reasons such as the lack of union and management consensus. In 1924 the Labour Home Secretary, Arthur Henderson, introduced a Factory Bill. The bill complied with international recommendations for a 48 hour week, but this clause applied to women and juveniles only. In addition, Henderson's bill extended the same regulations to workshops as applied to factories and increased the number of factory inspectors. In compliance with the recommendations of a female labour deputation from the SJC, were proposals for improved lighting, heating, mess areas and lavatories.²⁸ Unfortunately, before its second reading, Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government fell, and with it Labour's factory bill.

The Conservative government under Baldwin voiced its intent to reintroduce a factory bill. However, after months of delays, the bill was eventually dropped from the Tory parliamentary agenda.²⁹ In response, Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson introduced a private member's Factories Bill in February 1926. The bill contained much the same provisions as Henderson's, regarding health and safety codes, including a

48-hour work week for women and juveniles. Although the Commons rejected Wilkinson's bill, she successfully directed attention back to factory legislation. Tory Home Secretary, Joynson Hicks, reintroduced a factory bill with a projected passage for early 1927. Fearful that the Labour bill favoured the workers too heavily, Joynson Hicks tabled conciliatory legislation acceptable to both employers and employees, a "Bill that would be practically an agreed measure, and not one that would be a cause of new animosity between the two sides in industry."³⁰ Despite the Home Secretary's pledge, the Tories repeatedly postponed factory reform since labour and management could not agree on its terms.³¹ Employers baulked at costly safety changes. Labour representatives like Ben Tillett of the TUC claimed that the Tory bill contained too many loopholes. For example, the bill's leniency towards overtime practically nullified the 48-hour work week clause for women and juveniles.³²

Factory reform reappeared on the Labour government's parliamentary agenda in 1929. While drafting the legislation, Home Secretary J.R. Clynes received deputations from interested parties and pressure groups including the TUC, the SJC and the feminist Open Door Council.³³ Unfortunately, like its Tory predecessors, the Labour government postponed the bill's introduction and there was still no consensus by the government's dissolution in 1931. Not until 1937, after a decade of debates and deputations, was a revised Factories Act finally passed. Among its provisions was the 48-hour week for women and juveniles, with overtime not to exceed 100 hours per year.³⁴

The views of opposing female labour advocates and feminist groups contributed to the prolonged debate over factory legislation. Fundamental disagreements arose over the inclusion of clauses which applied only to women workers, and not to all workers regardless of sex. In particular, the

organizations disputed the efficacy of safety regulations within the factory acts which prohibited women's exposure to dangerous substances, but made no restrictions on male workers. Separate from the Factory Bill, the Lead Paint (Protection Against Poisoning) Act (1926) banned women from working with lead paint. The controversy over the Lead Paint Act provided further impetus to the debate over sex-specific legislation.

Since the previous century, politicians, employers and workers recognized health risks related to the use of lead compounds. Eventually, given the growing incidence of lead poisoning among workers in the painting trades, a 1915 government report recommended the substitution of alternative materials for lead in paint manufacture. The report also advocated the prohibition of the "importation, sale or use of any paint material which contains more than 5 percent of its dry weight of a soluble lead compound."³⁵ Recommendations for safety precautions in the workplace outlined in the report included the abolition of dry sanding to minimize the inhalation of lead contaminated dust, and the provision of washing facilities and overalls for all workers.

Organized labour agreed on the dangers of lead poisoning, and the 1921 Geneva International Labour Conference demanded the prohibition of white lead in paint.³⁶ In response to the Geneva recommendations, the Tory government launched another committee inquiry on lead paint in early 1924. The resulting report blamed lead poisoning on paint dust inhalation and condemned the practice of "dry rubbing down." While the committee deemed it unnecessary to ban lead paint altogether, they favoured increased safety standards.³⁷ Later that year, the Labour government indicated its intentions to ratify the Geneva Convention's complete ban on lead paint.³⁸ However, the government was unable to do so given its short term in office and the insistence by

industrial health authorities, such as Sir Thomas Oliver, that lead poisoning among painters could be avoided by wet sanding.³⁹

The Conservatives took up the lead paint issue, and in 1926 Home Secretary Joynson-Hicks introduced the Lead Paint (Protection Against Poisoning) Bill. The bill provided for increased safety precautions for painters, such as the prevention, where possible, of dry sanding, regular medical examinations for painters, the use of protective clothing and the securing of facilities for washing. Clause two prohibited the employment of women and young persons in painting buildings with lead paint. Exemptions allowed for apprentices in the painting trade under approved arrangements, and women engaged in decorative work.⁴⁰

The bill received mixed reactions. A TUC deputation to the Home Secretary led by Congress chairman Arthur Pugh, Margaret Bondfield and Walter Citrine condemned the bill on the grounds that it failed to ratify the Geneva proposals for the complete ban on white lead paint for interior use. J.A. Gibson of the Operative House and Ship Painters admitted that while the bill's safety regulations could minimize dangers, they fell short of the remedies workers wanted: prohibition of white lead in paint. Gibson maintained that the unions and the employers federation favoured the lead ban. However, it was the manufacturing firms that opposed it.⁴¹

Women's organizations were divided over clause two of the Lead Paint Bill given its restrictions on women's work. Women agreed on the need for improved safety standards in the workplace. However, they disagreed over exactly how state-imposed regulations should apply to women. For example, the editors of the Woman's Leader, an equal rights feminist paper, complained that the bill's provisions should apply to both women and men. The Woman's Leader pointed out that while Joynson Hicks declined a total ban on lead paint, given

the apparent insufficient medical proof that this measure was necessary, the Home Secretary did not hesitate to prohibit women from using lead paint, although no medical evidence confirmed that women were more susceptible to lead poisoning than men.⁴² Conversely, the SJC, composed of female Labour leaders and female trade unionists, supported the Lead Paint Bill. Like the TUC, the SJC and female Labour Party leaders like Margaret Bondfield, favoured a total white lead ban; however, they reasoned that any protective measures were better than none at all, and as previous factory reforms illustrated, ameliorative regulations for women and juveniles were often the first step to more comprehensive reforms.⁴³ Despite public disputes over the terms of the bill, (i.e. whether its provisions went too far or not far enough), the bill passed in December 1926, with an amendment by the House of Lords that women presently employed as painters should not lose their jobs.⁴⁴ Thereafter, the question of women and lead poisoning merged with the larger issue of factory reform given the proposed clauses to restrict women's employment in dangerous processes.

As Robin Miller Jacoby points out, the issue of protective legislation raises a myriad of related ideological, economic and physiological questions.⁴⁵ In both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, factory reform became a feminist issue given the inclusion of sex-specific regulations intended to protect women, the "weaker sex," as real and potential mothers. The 1920s debate over protective legislation for women workers bears important similarities and differences to previous disagreements on the subject. In both instances, feminist opponents presented ideological arguments for female equality, while labour activists defended sex-specific legislation because of women's low status and pay. In addition, labour activists felt that given working women's maternal function and domestic

responsibilities, their experience as workers was different from their male counterparts'. Women in the labour movement believed that protective legislation should compensate for and reflect women's differences. The debate during the 1920s was intensified by the economic slump after the war and the reconstruction rhetoric concerning social and economic normalization. Likewise, the anti-feminist backlash of the post-suffrage era was consistent with the discourse of "normalization," as politicians and trade unionists advocated women's return to the home while female labour representatives insisted on special legislation to take account of women's maternal and domestic functions.

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Chapter 4:

The Debate

Whether as feminists, as socialists, or simply as homemakers interested in improving their circumstances, women in the 1920s struggled to define a role for themselves and for gender politics within the official party system. As the preceding chapters suggest, part of that struggle involved a reassessment of the future relationship between the women's movement and party politics. Although support for the suffrage movement crossed class and party lines, after 1918 women were often compelled to choose between class and gender loyalties.¹

Yet, despite class and ideological differences, organized feminists and women in the Labour Party engaged in similar debates regarding the legitimacy of gender politics. As Pamela Graves points out, Labour women debated the issue of women's "equality" versus women's "special needs" as members of a male-dominated political party. Similarly, feminists within the women's NUSEC divided on the same issue with respect to their post-suffrage agenda, as "new feminists" supported social welfare legislation to assist women and children, while "old" feminists adhered to their belief in legal and political parity with men as the means to equality.² As previously stated, Labour women and "new" feminists shared similar reform agendas. However, throughout the 1920s, tensions developed between organized non-aligned feminist groups and Labour women, possibly based on class differences.

The growing antagonism between working-class Labour women and middle-class feminists is particularly evident with respect to the public debate over sex-based protective legislation. The debate surrounding different industrial standards for women raises several historiographic questions

of relevance to the apparent demise of feminist politics during the inter-war period. For example, did Labour women voluntarily break their ties with middle-class feminists over protective legislation out of class loyalties or in obedience to the dictates of the predominantly male Labour Party? Did the protective legislation debate culminate in a decisive break between Labour women and the feminist movement, as some historians claim? How did Labour women and NUSEC "new" feminists reconcile their demands for equal pay and better trade union representation and demands for equality in the workplace, with their support for sex-specific laws which asserted women's difference? And, how did the equalitarain "old" feminists, the unwavering opponents of protective legislation, defend their position against accusations that, as middle-class professionals, they misunderstood the situation of working-class women, who needed protection against exploitation in the workplace? Perhaps more than any other issue, the debate over protective legislation illustrates the dilemma women activists faced in reconciling women's "equality" and "difference."

Beyond the ideological and practical terms of the debate, the dispute over protective legislation illustrates the conflict between the Labour Party and feminists, both within and without the party. Feminism, as a political strategy for women's social and economic emancipation, contravened the class politics of the Labour Party. Top-ranking Labour Party officials, including Arthur Henderson and Marion Phillips, viewed feminism as a middle class movement and a potentially divisive force within the Labour movement. In a 1918 publication, Henderson lamented the "unhappy sex-antagonisms produced by the long and bitter struggle for the franchise." Likewise, Henderson reminds women that "the organized working-class movement which includes both men and women, has evolved a policy intended to promote the common interests of both

sexes, and we believe that when this policy is properly understood by the bulk of women they will recognize that separate sex organizations are fundamentally undemocratic and wholly reactionary."³ Similarly, Phillips recommended that women "throw their strength into the development of a strong political organization embracing both men and women and not to follow the lines of sex division."⁴ Party officials believed that feminism, as a women's movement, divided political issues along sex lines, and thereby weakened working-class solidarity.

During the 1920's, vocal female activists within the Labour Party promoted feminism and socialism, and held memberships in the NUSEC despite official disapproval of feminist organizations.⁵ As mentioned earlier, Labour feminists pressured the national executive to integrate gender issues into the official Party platform. "Liberal" historian Harold Smith cites the protective legislation debate as evidence of Labour's growing ambivalence towards feminism during the interwar period. This issue alienated Labour women from British feminists and hindered any future cooperation between the two groups. The "old" equal rights feminists, specifically the members of the Open Door Council, opposed protective legislation on the grounds that it restricted women's access to employment. They insisted that all industrial legislation must be based on the nature of the job and not the sex of the worker. In contrast, Labour women, such as Bondfield and Phillips, supported protective legislation, and accused the middle-class feminists of representing employers who wished to hire women because they were cheaper.⁶ Smith contends that Labour leaders, both male and female, took advantage of this debate to further isolate Labour and feminism. He maintains that female Labour leaders, such as Bondfield and Phillips, supported protective legislation for women in accordance with the views

of the male leadership and its trade union affiliates.⁷

In contrast, "Labour" historian Pat Thane contends that the dispute over protective legislation was not part of a male Labour conspiracy to isolate feminists from Labour women. By supporting protective legislation, Labour women adopted the position traditionally held by women trade unionists since the late nineteenth century. However, Thane recognized the complexity of this debate. Many NUSEC members, especially the "new" feminists, favoured protective legislation for women, while some prominent Labour women, like the long-time suffragist and NUSEC member Selina Cooper, opposed special protection. Beyond the arguments over gender and class politics, Thane sees Labour women as advocates of ameliorative legislation for women workers, legislation which they could gain for women, but which they hoped would be extended to all workers in the future.⁸

This chapter addresses the terms of the mid-twenties debate between Labour women and equal rights feminists. In so doing, the ideological correlations between the contemporary opponents, and the current historians become increasingly apparent. In addition, the arguments presented by both sides aptly illustrate the difficulty women experienced in their attempts to adapt gender differences to the ideology of political parties, whether they be socialist or liberal. Finally, the debate suggests that the notion of a shared feminist interest is as tendentious as that of a shared class consciousness.

Although factory reform was not necessarily a women's issue, the related question of sex-based protective legislation provided a forum for debate between Labour women and middle-class feminists. The conflict focused on the efficacy of health and safety restrictions directed at industrial women; the arguments presented by the opposing sides reveal ideological differences and class tensions. As

the preceding chapter indicates, the mid-twenties controversy over protective legislation developed from women's work experiences during World War I.

Immediately after the war Labour women held mixed views of protective legislation. Before 1914, Labour women unconditionally defended protective legislation in accordance with the women's trade union movement. Similarly, the SJC supported the recommendations of the International Labour Conference on Women's Work limiting the extent of women's night work, weekly hours, and their prohibition from dangerous processes "where it is impossible to provide for sufficiently healthy conditions."⁹ The SJC also endorsed the Conference's provision that "Equal Pay shall be given to both sexes for Equal Work" (sic). In effect, the SJC accepted the principles of equality regarding pay, and difference regarding concessions for women's added domestic duties. Yet Beatrice Webb's minority report to the War Cabinet Committee on Women in Industry (1919) indicates a difference in opinion. Webb held that future factory legislation should eliminate "all special provisions differentiating men from women."¹⁰ Although the Labour SJC debated this point, the WTUL generally accepted Webb's position. Another prominent Labour member, Mary MacArthur of the NFWW, continued to support protective legislation. Given her experience with women munition workers, she maintained that women workers needed both better trade union representation and state intervention. Specifically, MacArthur advocated the "fullest precautions against all poisonous processes and dangerous trades."¹¹

As a result of women's industrial experience during the war, protective legislation for women was a much debated topic in the reconstruction era. Differences over this issue were not necessarily determined by class or political persuasion, as the the opinions of Webb and MacArthur

illustrate. Similarly, non-aligned feminists wavered over their traditional opposition to sex-based legislation, however much it contravened their liberal ideals. However, by the mid-twenties, the struggle over protective legislation became a full-blown public confrontation as feminists and labour women openly disputed the terms of Labour's 1924 Factory Bill, and the Conservative government's Lead Paint Act of 1926.¹²

Despite its earlier consideration of Webb's 1918 Minority Report on industrial women and its recommendations for complete industrial sexual parity, the SJC endorsed Henderson's 1924 recommendations for limiting women's hours, night work and employment in dangerous processes. Pamela Graves attributes the SJC's stance to women's declining economic power in the recession of the mid-twenties.¹³ The dismissal of women dilutees, growing female unemployment, the continued disregard for existing labour laws and wage cuts all tempered the immediate post-war optimism female labour representatives displayed earlier given their modified position on special legislation.¹⁴ By 1924 and with the introduction of Henderson's factory bill, the members of the SJC realized the impermanence of women's occupational wartime gains. Because women remained the most disadvantaged workers in terms of pay and union representation, the SJC decided that women still warranted legislative protection.

In contrast, the NUSEC officially withdrew its former qualified acceptance of protective legislation. They objected that Henderson's factory bill continued to classify adult women workers with juveniles, as had the 1901 Factory Act, despite improvements in women's trade unionism. While this designation undermined women's rights as adult citizens, it also gave inadequate attention to the special needs of young persons under eighteen, who required more protection than adult women.

The NUSEC position was openly criticized by Labour representatives. Fabian labour activist Barbara Drake wrote a scathing critique of the feminist position in The Labour Woman. Drake set the pattern of the Labour women's position when she framed her attack in class terms. The "well-meaning ladies" of the middle-class who objected to protective legislation as an infringement of the "individual liberty" of factory operatives illustrated their "ignorance of the economic position of the wage-earner."¹⁵ Evidently, as a socialist interested in labour issues, Drake felt qualified to defend the interests of working women, although she herself was also a member of the middle-class, an irony which was not lost on her feminist critics.

Although Labour's Factory Bill died due to the 1924 change in government, the debate between feminists and Labour representatives resumed over the terms of the 1926 Lead Paint (Protection Against Poisoning) Act and the Conservative Factory Bill(2). As the previous chapter suggests, the Tory Factory Bill was delayed owing to the apparent difficulty of arriving at a consensus between the employers and the unions. Tensions between the two groups, exacerbated by the defeat of the 1926 General Strike, further undermined the possibility of worker and employer cooperation.

Throughout the parliamentary debates over the factory bill, Labour women staunchly defended protective legislation against its middle-class feminist critics. Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson compared the "practical experience of the factory workers" as represented by Labour, with the "theoretical case" presented by middle-class feminists. While equalitarian arguments were fine in theory, Wilkinson attested that men and women did not compete on equal terms. Wilkinson argued that because women's labour was cheap and unorganized, it was "common sense that the State should protect them as far as possible against unscrupulous

exploitation of their health and strength."¹⁶ Against the criticism that legislation jeopardized women's jobs, Wilkinson claimed that in the trades where protection was most needed, "women were too cheap for any protective legislation to weigh against their being employed." She concluded that ideally, protective legislation should apply to both men and women; however, based on past experience, protection for men has followed the protection of women.¹⁷ Wilkinson restated the Labour position on protective legislation in a public debate with American feminist, Doris Stevens, a member of the Open Door Council International.¹⁸

Discussions between Labour women and feminists continued over the terms of the Lead Paint Act. On behalf of industrial women, female Labour leaders supported clause 2 which prohibited women and juveniles from working with lead paint. Labour women defended the bill against its NUSEC critics, who called for a total ban on white lead, instead of provisions for women only.¹⁹ In a House of Commons debate, Margaret Bondfield argued persuasively against a Liberal amendment tabled by a Mr. Harney, MP from South Shields, on behalf of the NUSEC, to remove clause 2 from the act. She asked the House to reject the amendment since the protection of women from lead poisoning was a step closer to both the protection of men and the ban of white lead in accordance with the Geneva Convention.²⁰ In this respect, Bondfield took up Wilkinson's earlier defense of protective legislation as a partial move towards more comprehensive and effective legislation for all workers. Thus, Labour women employed the same arguments put forth a century earlier by philanthropic factory reformers, such as the members of short time committees.

By late 1927 the exchange between opposing feminists and Labour women had broken out into an all-out "pamphlet war". A series of publications, issued between 1927 and 1930,

described in detail the positions of both sides. As a means of winning support, feminists and Labour women distributed their respective pamphlets at mixed and women's trade union meetings, international labour conventions and political conferences.²¹

Throughout the propaganda exchange, the Labour women enjoyed the advantage of Labour Party support and its long standing association with the labour movement. The case for protective legislation was presented by the SJC, an advisory group which represented the political labour, trade union and cooperative movements. Consequently, the SJC claimed to represent the views of working women, and although the Committee admitted that their position in favour of sex-based regulations aligned with that of the male trade unions, the SJC claimed they acted "in the best interests of working women" and were not swayed by male opinion. The SJC identified its position with that of the labour movement in the past and the present, and attested that while their view was not new, they were pressured to restate it, given "...the attempts of certain feminist organizations to oppose protective legislation for women on the ground that it is restrictive and injurious."²²

In defense of protective legislation, the SJC cited earlier arguments by Wilkinson and Bondfield related to women's inferior position in the workplace. Women required special regulations to compensate for their inadequate union representation. The SJC attributed women's poor organization to the fact that women normally left employment on marriage. Consequently, the age of women workers was lower, they were less experienced than men, and the women themselves regard their employment as temporary. While men were able to win concessions via collective bargaining, improvements for women could only be won by legislative enactment.

The SJC identified three forms of protective

legislation: provisions that should apply to both sexes, but could not be obtained for men at that time; regulations that were of greater necessity for women than men given their physiological differences; and protection for women based on their maternal functions.²³ Under the first heading, the SJC addressed hours of work, and the future possibility of securing a 48-hour work week for all workers and female exclusion from night and shift work. The second category suggested that physically, women were unsuitable for dangerous and heavy occupations. Under this heading the SJC listed outside window cleaning, underground work in mines and active military service. Women should also be exempt from exposure to excessive heat, heavy lifting and handling poisonous substances which could be particularly injurious to women. Specifically, the SJC supported the Lead Paint Act and its restrictions on women workers, citing a 1908 factory report which noted a higher incidence of lead poisoning among female pottery workers and which suggested women's higher susceptibility.²⁴ Within the third category, the SJC advocated statutory maternity provisions for all women workers. Women should be prohibited from working for six weeks after childbirth, have the option of leaving work six weeks prior to confinement, and should have adequate maintenance during the entire period. Under the 1901 Factory Act, women were prohibited from working for four weeks after delivery, but were not compensated for this forced leave. While the 1911 Health Insurance Act provided limited maternity benefits for women in insurable trades, the SJC favoured an extension of the program to cover all women workers.

The SJC concluded that low wages--whether of men or women--constituted the greatest "industrial evil" working-class women faced. Women's low wages undercut men's rates and low men's wages forced married women into the job market

to subsidize their husband's earnings, which in turn added to the wage competition between men and women. Therefore, to stabilize wages and eliminate sweating, the SJC supported a fixed minima of hours and wages for women. They emphasized, however, that their proposed restrictions should apply to industrial women and not professional and clerical workers.²⁵ Thus, Labour women stressed the different situation of working-class women, under the realization that protective measures could be extended and have the negative effect of limiting women's access to white-collar occupations.

In accordance with Mary MacArthur's 1918 position, the improvement of conditions for working women could be accomplished via trade union activity and state intervention. But until women attained the same level of organization and bargaining power as men, protective measures provided the only means of checking female exploitation. Ideally male and female workers should be protected and paid equally.

Still, Labour women justified special legislation for female workers based on the perceived ill effects of some forms of industrial work on women and their families. In a letter to the editor of The Times, Labour women stated that "women's problems necessarily involve the welfare of children."²⁶ Women's exposure to toxic substances affected the health of their offspring, and consequently the future health of the nation. Comparing their "practical experience" with that of "persons not in contact with factory life," Labour women and the SJC chastized their opponents' attempts to remove industrial safeguards which protected working women and their families.²⁷ An article in the New Statesman expressed a similar argument in favour of special provisions for women based on their maternal functions. Labour women accepted the contested view "that the health and capacity of women has a specially close relationship to the life and health of the community. We think that potential

maternity, and the functions connected with it, do constitute a reason for special safeguards."²⁸ Labour advocates admitted that although experts were divided over whether women were more susceptible to lead poisoning than men, evidence suggested that the severity of lead poisoning was greater among women. Medical reports linked prolonged exposure to lead with miscarriages and birth defects, again suggesting that the state must protect the health of women in the interests of the unborn and the future strength of the nation.²⁹


Labour women's preoccupation with maternal health reflected the contemporary interest in motherhood and procreation during the interwar period. Since the turn of the century social reformers and scientists had expressed concern over the poor health of the working classes. Many socialists, including Ramsay MacDonald and Sidney Webb, viewed the problem as one of racial deterioration. Improved education, wages and sanitation were offered as solutions to the declining fitness of the British "race" evident in the poor health of the labouring classes.³⁰ Women in the socialist movement focused their attentions on improved health and education for mothers and children. Before World War I, the Women's Labour League and the Women's Co-Operative Guild founded baby clinics and offered classes in mothercraft and nutrition to improve the health of women and children.³¹ Between the wars Labour women supported campaigns for school meals and family endowment; both schemes were aimed at improving the health and living standards of women and children.³²

In addition, eugenist arguments for strengthening the British race underscored the preoccupation with maternal health. In 1904 the Sociological Society at the London School of Economics defined eugenics as "...the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities

of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage." Michael Freedman notes the significance of this definition: eugenicists were interested in both biological heredity and social environment.³³ Racial purity was a fundamental concern of conservative imperialists given Britain's declining status as an industrial power. Nonetheless, socialists, like MacDonald and Webb, and liberal progressives, including L.T. Hobhouse and J.A. Hobson, adopted eugenicist arguments as a means of improving the standard of living for the lower classes. They reasoned that by limiting family size and increasing education and medical facilities for the labouring classes, the general health of the population would improve. And if the labouring classes received the same advantages in education and medical care, as the upper classes, the disparity between rich and poor could be decreased, since, theoretically, no one class enjoyed the luxury of services that the others could not afford. Social reformers emphasized the quality and not quantity of offspring and that in the interests of the nation, the state should assume greater responsibility for the health and welfare of mothers and children.³⁴

In light of the contemporary discourse on maternal health and racial purity, the SJC concern over lead poisoning is entirely understandable. It would be misleading to assume, however, that Labour women supported protective legislation solely for eugenicist reasons. Rather, they exploited eugenicist language in support of their feminist social reform. In their justifications for sex-based legislation, Labour women repeatedly stressed women's maternal functions within society and the need to protect women as both industrial workers and mothers.

Labour women accused the opponents of protective legislation, "extremists in the movement for women's rights," of sacrificing the health of women and children in favour of



a "hypothetical equality."³⁵ Labour women characterized the non-aligned feminist opposition as professional and privileged, with no real knowledge of industrial conditions or the lives of working women. In this manner, the SJC articulated the debate in class terms, pitting a middle-class idealism against the practical reforms of the labour movement. Ironically, the prominent advocates of protective legislation were also professional and privileged women. (i.e. Beatrice Webb, Barbara Drake, B.L. Hutchins, Marion Phillips and Dr. Ethel Benthams).³⁶ Nevertheless, they claimed the authority to represent working women based on their practical and political activity in the Labour movement. Labour women characterized the opponents of protective legislation as anti-labour, "laissez faire feminists." Yet this description ignores the vocal Labour feminists, such as Dorothy Jewson, Monica Whately and Selina Cooper, who opposed sex-based legislation, just as it dismisses the qualified acceptance of protective policies by non-party "new" feminists, like Eleanor Rathbone and Mary Stocks. In effect, despite Labour women's emphasis on class differences, the debate cannot be reduced to a simple class-based dichotomy or a crude distinction between "Labour women" and "feminists."

During the 1920s equalitarian feminists opposed sex-based protective legislation for ideological reasons. Special regulations were discriminatory against women and contravened their right to decide if an occupation was unsuitable or if the pay was worth the possible health risks. Moreover, beyond abstract arguments for equal rights feminists criticized sex-based legislation for practical reasons. They favoured protective legislation if it was based on the nature of the job and not the sex of the worker, and argued that if a substance was hazardous to female workers, it was also hazardous to males. Prohibiting women from working with toxins did nothing to eliminate the health

dangers workers faced; it only ensured that the workers being poisoned were men and not women.³⁷

Yet despite their vocal condemnation of sex-specific regulations in the Woman's Leader, feminists within the NUSEC were divided over this issue. This internal disagreement over protective legislation exemplifies the NUSEC debate over feminist policy in the post-suffrage years of the 1920s. Jane Lewis characterizes the "old" feminists as equalitarians; they insisted that the NUSEC's primary goal was to obtain equality of opportunity between men and women, thereby continuing the suffrage dedication to women's equal political rights. The "new" feminists, led by Eleanor Rathbone, argued that society should concentrate on "feminist reforms" to secure "real equality" for women. "New" feminists acknowledged the contributions of women as wives and mothers. They advocated a political strategy which recognized that women's needs and circumstances were different from those of men, a strategy which defined women's needs in their own terms, and did not require the disintegration of gender roles.³⁸ Rathbone argued that women's work, especially domestic work and childrearing, was undervalued and underpaid. Real equality meant freeing women from economic dependence on husbands by granting them financial support for their work in the home. Susan Pedersen posits that "old" feminist campaigns for equal pay and employment opportunities did nothing for the majority of women, who were unwaged homemakers. Pedersen claims that only state intervention, in the form of family endowment for example, could assist women in the home, since welfare programs circumvented the labour market to provide independent support for mothers. In spite of protests by the "old" equalitarians such as Lady Rhondda and Lady Balfour of Burleigh, "new" feminists like Rathbone, Eva Hubback and Mary Stocks, directed NUSEC support to campaigns for state-funded family endowment and increased

birth control information at public clinics.³⁹

In a series entitled "What is Equality?", The Woman's Leader presented the two sides of this heated debate. Rathbone defended the "new" feminist perspective that male needs should not be the "measuring tape for women," and that the simple removal of legal and economic strictures against women would render them equal with men. While Rathbone favoured "equal rights and opportunities," she insisted that women were entitled to dictate and demand social reforms which affected them more than men, i.e. improved housing and maternal care.⁴⁰ Elizabeth Abbott responded that "new" feminism did not believe in equality for women, and under the assumption that maternity was "an eternal disability," "new" feminists substituted equality with "benevolent despotism." According to Abbott the debate addressed the fundamental definitions of not only equality, but feminism itself: "The issue is not between 'old' and 'new' feminism. The issue is between feminism--equalitarianism--and that which is not feminism."⁴¹ In a third article, NUSEC member Helen Ward urged reconciliation and co-operation between the two sides. Ward reasoned that it would be a mistake to abandon the "equality principle," however, it was also important to adopt a "varied and elastic programme." Ward concluded with an appeal to the NUSEC membership: "...let us all be neither old or new feminists but just present day feminists with a glorious tradition to follow, to add to, and to hand on."⁴² Despite Ward's efforts, disagreements over the NUSEC's increasingly flexible position on protective legislation created a schism between "old" and "new" feminists.

For decades liberal feminists grappled with the dilemma of protective legislation. Ideologically, sex-based legislation contradicted the principle of equal rights for men and women and was therefore unacceptable. On the other hand, opposition to protective measures ensured that women

remain in potentially dangerous work areas and further alienated working-class women from middle-class feminism. Feminists confronted this debate once again in the interwar period given the growing concern over women and lead poisoning. In 1920 the NUSEC adopted a concilliatory stance. Based on reports describing the adverse effects of lead on women's maternal functions, the NUSEC supported government proposals to regulate women's employment in processes involving lead compounds. The NUSEC admitted that "much as we dislike discriminating protective legislation, this is a case where discrimination is justified."⁴³

Despite its earlier qualified acceptance of protective legislation, by 1924, the NUSEC firmly opposed measures directed at women only. The reassertion of a stronger position may be attributed to the terms of the proposed Factory Bill and the restrictive clause 2 of the Lead Paint Act, which prohibited women from working with lead paint. In addition, several medical reports linked paternal lead poisoning with infant birth defects.⁴⁴ The feminist position was reaffirmed by positive reports from female physicians, such Dr. Rhodda Adamson and Dr. Janet Campbell, whose research attested that women's health was not adversely affected by heavy factory work, such as mechanical engineering.⁴⁵

Between 1921 and 1926, it appears that the "old" feminist condemnation of sex-based protective legislation held sway within the NUSEC. However, at its 1927 Annual Conference "new" feminists on the NUSEC executive tabled a motion to modify the society's critical stance on protective legislation. NUSEC president Eleanor Rathbone admitted that while protective legislation should be based "...not upon sex, but the nature of the work," she asked feminists to consider proposed regulations should they "...promote the well-being of the community and of the workers affected" and if the "...the workers affected desire the regulation and are

promoting it through their organizations."⁴⁶ Equalitarian "old" feminists felt Rathbone's amendment weakened the fundamental object of the Union, the "equal status of women with men." After a prolonged debate the motion carried by one vote, 81 to 80, and in protest eleven members of the NUSEC executive resigned. These included the vocal equalitarian Elizabeth Abbott, suffragist Lady Balfour and Labour Party member, Monica Whately.⁴⁷

Rathbone's amendment to the NUSEC platform suggests a return its earlier recognition that protective legislation was necessary in some cases. The "new" feminist cautious acceptance of protective legislation coincided with their advocacy of maternalist reforms based on women's special needs as wives and mothers. In addition, as Jane Lewis notes, "new" feminists realized that to maintain the strict equalitarian position would alienate trade union women, who had fought for protection.⁴⁸ In fact, a number of NUSEC "new" feminists who supported both family endowment and protective legislation, Mary Stocks and Eva Hubback for example, were active Labour Party members. Thus, given their extremely qualified acceptance of protective legislation, "new" feminists, like Rathbone, acknowledged the position of Labour women and the SJC in their campaign on behalf of women workers. However, it must be noted that, despite the "new" feminists' partial recognition of protective legislation, articles in the NUSEC paper, The Woman's Leader, continued to express concern over discriminatory industrial legislation, suggesting the continued influence of "old feminists" on the paper's editorial board. While "new" feminists conceded the efficacy of special regulations for women in some cases, they still believed that special laws, as espoused by Labour women and the SJC, ultimately failed to deal with the systemic problems of women's employment, low status and wages in the workplace, and inadequate recognition and payment for

domestic labour in the home.⁴⁹

Equalitarian "old" feminists launched a more aggressive campaign against protective legislation. In May 1926, they formed the Open Door Council (ODC), with the mandate to secure that women shall be free to work and be protected as workers on the same terms as men, and that legislation and regulations dealing with conditions shall be based upon the nature of the work and not upon the sex of the worker; and to secure for women, irrespective of marriage or childbirth, the right at all times to decide whether or not they shall engage in paid work, and to ensure that no legislation or regulation shall deprive them of this right.⁵⁰

From its inception the Open Door Council provided the most outspoken opposition to sex-based regulation. At an NUSEC conference on protective legislation in early 1927, the ODC adamantly condemned special legislation for women and maintained that, instead, women needed adequate union membership. Against protests that women were difficult to organize, the ODC cited the increased unionization of women during the war years, and concluded that "You can organize women if you give them equal pay and treat them as comrades."⁵¹ Chaired by Elizabeth Abbott, the Council's membership included several of the former members of the NUSEC executive, such as Lady Balfour, and Monica Whately; prominent former suffrage workers, actress Cicely Hamilton and Labour member, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence; and outspoken equalitarian feminists from the Six Point Group, like Lady Rhondda and Helen Archdale.⁵²

While the ODC took issue with the "new" feminist modified policy on protective legislation, the Council aimed its criticisms mainly at the Labour advocates of protective legislation: Labour women and the SJC. Between 1927 and 1930, the ODC published a series of pamphlets which argued against protective legislation.⁵³ In an effort to win support from the SJC, the ODC distributed its tracts at women's trade union and Labour Party meetings and presented its case at

international labour conventions.⁵⁴ In addition, the ODC and SJC debated the issue of protective legislation in a series of letters to The Times in 1927.⁵⁵ The opposing sides hosted public forums in 1927 and 1929, while Abbott of the ODC and Phillips of the SJC aired their respective positions in a BBC broadcast.⁵⁶

The arguments of the ODC focused on the need for equal opportunities and conditions for "all adult women workers, professional or industrial, married or unmarried; and equal chances of training and entry into all the professions and trades."⁵⁷ Against accusations that the ODC favoured the unregulated exploitation of workers by their employers, the ODC repeatedly insisted that it was not opposed to the protection of the workers, but protection should be based on the nature of the occupation and not the sex of the worker. For example, instead of prohibiting the employment of women in lead processes, the ODC preferred better safety standards for all workers, and ideally, a total ban on the use of white lead. While the ODC admitted the necessity of regulations to check the "evils of the Factory system," they feared the "humanitarian legislation" which singled out women was misplaced philanthropy. The ODC asserted that exclusion of women from certain trades and processes, whether to protect their health or to eliminate female competition, limited women's field of employment and ensured that women remained in unskilled, poorly paid jobs.⁵⁸

In addition, the ODC argued that protective legislation actually re-enforced low wages for women, based on the assumption that employers viewed sex-based regulations as a kind of compensation for pay inequities between men and women. And as long as the equal ability of women workers was undermined by special concessions for hours and safety, the demand for equal pay with men would be undermined, even though women might be performing the same jobs. Protective

measures, the ODC asserted, legislated sexual inequality; it subjugated women by virtue of their sex, as others were subjugated for their colour.⁵⁹ The ODC insisted that of far greater damage to the health of industrial women than toxins, heavy lifting and night work, were the effects of poverty and malnutrition, the inevitable result of women's low wages.⁶⁰ "Real protection" for women workers could only be guaranteed, not through differential legislation, but via equal pay and job opportunities, and better and equal trade union organization, with the same status and rights as adult male members.⁶¹

With respect to the Lead Paint Act, the ODC criticized the SJC's support of the Bill's restrictive clause 2. The SJC based its recommendations on the "medical evidence" of Dr. Thomas Legge, who reported women's increased susceptibility to lead poisoning in a 1908 evaluation of pottery workers. The ODC challenged the accuracy of the twenty-year-old report, dismissed the "evidence" as "opinion," and cited current documentation of lead poisoning among male house painters and plumbers as testimony that the substance should be banned.⁶² Ironically, Dr. Legge himself no longer subscribed to his earlier position that women were more susceptible to lead poisoning than men. He later resigned from his post as Chief Medical Inspector of Factories because the government's Lead Paint Act failed to implement a full ban on white lead paint to protect workers of either sex, in accordance with the 1921 Geneva Convention recommendations.⁶³

In a 1929 lecture, Dr. Legge expressed concern over the numerous cases of lead poisoning in the "motor and wireless accumulator industry."⁶⁴ Dr. Legge directed his remarks to male workers, since a special regulation banned women from the manufacture of electric accumulators.⁶⁵ Dr. Legge's lecture substantiates the ODC's position that protective

legislation did not necessarily safeguard the workers' health, but merely ensured that men were being poisoned and not women. The ODC admitted the dangers of lead poisoning "...for the individual and the race," however, they adamantly denied "...that the evils of this poison on the race can be obviated by excluding women from paid work in lead processes." To eliminate lead contamination, the Council advocated a total ban on white lead in industry and the implementation of sex-blind safety regulations. However, under no circumstances should protective legislation apply to women, and not men.⁶⁶

American journalist and feminist Crystal Eastman described the choice British feminists faced: either "to level up or level down."⁶⁷ Equalitarians could advocate the inclusion of men workers under the existing health and safety codes that currently applied to women, or they could "...insist that women be taken out from under those regulations."⁶⁸ Judging from the ODC's call for the prohibition of white lead paint, they chose the former position, that of "levelling up." In a deputation to Labour Home Secretary J.R. Clynes, the ODC advocated universal factory legislation and equal safety standards for both sexes. Yet by attacking sex-based legislation, the ODC implied that the elimination of protective legislation was preferable to laws for women only, in effect the "levelling down" of industrial standards. Labour leaders like Bondfield and Wilkinson and the SJC, on the other hand, criticized the ODC for jeopardizing the industrial improvements women had already won. According to the equalitarian feminist, Vera Brittain, many women workers also feared that the ODC campaign would provide employers and politicians with an excuse to delay improvements in factory regulations and retract previous gains.⁶⁹

Against their Labour critics, the ODC and its supporters

staunchly maintained that much sex-differentiated legislation was based on preconceived prejudices concerning women's abilities. For example, the ODC attacked the existing limits on the weight women were allowed to lift, citing a report by the British Medical Women's Federation. The Federation posited that strength was not determined solely by gender, but was related to physique, general health and training. In addition, given technological improvements, the amount of heavy lifting in industry was declining, or could be facilitated by lifting tackle.⁷⁰ Similarly, the ODC dismissed restrictions on women cleaning machinery. Industrial accidents with machinery were not related to the worker's sex, but to circumstances in the workplace--crowding of machinery, poor lighting and carelessness due to fatigue or inexperience. The ODC reiterated its support for protective safety measures, and maintained that "...only competent, suitably clad, and duly authorised adult persons..." should undertake the cleaning of machinery.⁷¹

In their arguments against differential legislation, the ODC emphasized that regulations should apply to "adult persons" as opposed to the existing categories of "men" and "women and young persons." The 1901 Factory Act classified adult women workers with juveniles under eighteen. The ODC considered this allocation damaging to both women and adolescents, since it restricted adult women, and provided inadequate protection for young persons.⁷² In addition, the classification of women with children ensured women's unequal status, low pay and poor organization.⁷³

In their efforts to amend the terminology of the Factories Bill, the ODC appealed to the TUC and Labour Party. The SJC, representing the Party and trade unions, responded that it was logical to classify women with juveniles. Both groups were susceptible to exploitation by employers given their low wages and lack of trade union representation. The

SJC agreed with the ODC that increased union activity among female workers and pay equity with men could eliminate the need to group women with children. And both the TUC and Labour Party supported campaigns to increase female union membership. However, the SJC reasoned that as long as the majority of women workers were young and unorganized, they should be classed with young persons.⁷⁴

Although the ODC insisted on equal treatment for male and female workers, they acknowledged that women were affected by their maternal functions, and therefore required special concessions. Under the 1901 Factory Act, the law forbade the employment of women for four weeks after delivery. The ODC protested this regulation on the basis that it forced women to take a maternity leave, in some cases, without adequate benefits. The 1911 Health Insurance Act provided a maternity benefit; however, the ODC argued that it was insubstantial. Most working-class women could not afford a month's leave with reduced pay, and the ODC attested that often women took up strenuous home work, such as laundering, to subsidize benefits over the forced layoff. Rather than a legislated suspension, the ODC advocated the elimination of the four week prohibition and in its place a State Maternity Benefit plan for all working women. Such a scheme, they argued, would provide adequate maintenance for new mothers, but still enable women to decide for themselves if they wished to take a maternity leave.⁷⁵

In response, Labour women defended the 1901 maternity clause against the ODC's criticism. They claimed that employers were unwilling to grant women maternity leave, and that therefore it was necessary to legally ensure that women received time off. The SJC favoured improved benefits for women, but could not surrender the mandatory leave in its place. In the interests of women and the unborn, the SJC supported the legislated four week suspension.⁷⁶ The ODC

applauded the increasing state interest in the well-being of mothers and children. However, the equalitarian feminists interpreted the forced maternity leave in the same terms as the lead prohibitions for women workers. Both regulations defined women in relation to their functions as mothers first and workers second. In each case, be it via forced maternity leave, or the prohibition of women's exposure to toxins, the State infringed on the rights and liberties of women to ensure the good of the child and the future health of the nation. While the ODC was concerned about maternal and infant health, it maintained that the State need not intervene since individual women could decide what was best for themselves and their children.⁷⁷ Theoretically, the ODC was correct. Working women should have been able to decide the best course for themselves and their children. Yet working women were seldom given the opportunity to make occupational choices. Moreover, the ODC's continued insistence on the rights and freedoms that labouring women should be free to exercise, revealed its unfamiliarity with the domestic and occupational situations which industrial women faced. For example, as Ada Neild Chew's reports of female pottery workers revealed, due to economic hardships women were often compelled to accept dangerous jobs, although they feared the possible consequences.⁷⁸ Similarly, Marion Phillips condemned the ODC's recommendation to repeal the 1842 prohibition on female employment in underground mines. The ODC claimed that women should be free to choose any occupation, Phillips' contended, indicated its complete ignorance of industrial conditions and the wishes of labouring women.⁷⁹

Yet while the SJC claimed to represent the interests of female workers via its affiliation with trade unions and the Labour Party, the ODC rightly responded that industrial women did not unanimously support protective legislation. In fact,

women house decorators protested the terms of the Lead Paint Act. They claimed that interior decoration was a developing trade for women. However under clause 2 of the 1926 act women were no longer eligible for apprenticeships. Although women currently employed could not legally be let go, the female painters still perceived the bill as discriminatory, particularly since women in the painting trade had been not consulted. Like their male contemporaries, the women painters favored a ban on white lead paint for interior use. However, the male painters did not join in the women's protest against clause 2, suggesting that they were not averse to the possible elimination of female encroachment in their trade. Not surprisingly, the ODC capitalized on the female painters' protests. Here was evidence that working women did not unanimously favour protective legislation, as the SJC implied, and that protective legislation served the needs of male workers by removing female competition.⁸⁰

The SJC accused the feminist ODC of obstructing real improvements for women workers by their hypothethical idealism and laissez-faire attitude to protective measures of any kind. Recently Jane Lewis and Norbert Seldon have made similar criticisms of the ODC's policies.⁸¹ Admittedly the ODC based its goals on the abstract liberal principles of individualism and freedom of choice, ideals which unfortunately were irrelevant to women's industrial experience given the economic decline and high employment of the 1920s.

Yet although the SJC criticized the ODC's feminist idealism, many of the Council's proposals, such as increased unionization, equal pay, and improved maternity benefits for women workers, coincided with the reform strategies of Labour women and the TUC women's conferences. For example, throughout the twenties and early thirties, the Women Worker's Group of the TUC launched a vigorous campaign to

recruit women and establish new unions in unorganized occupations, such as domestic service.⁸² Labour women supported this effort, and at the 1927 conference, Mrs. Hudson of the Tailors and Garment Workers Union motioned that Labour Women's Organizations should insist that their wage-earning members belong to appropriate unions.⁸³ Like the ODC, Labour women supported "equal pay for equal work," and in a 1930 report entitled "How to Work Towards Equal Remuneration," they advocated increased organization for women in industry and the professions. Unionization improved women's bargaining power, and therefore was the first step towards equalizing wage rates between men and women.⁸⁴

This overlap between the goals of the equalitarian ODC and the Labour SJC, indicates that, despite fundamental ideological differences, they agreed on such important issues as equal pay and better unionization. This point was not lost to feminist supporters of the ODC. The London and National Society for Women's Service under Ray Strachey attributed much of the debate to the misunderstanding on the part of Labour women as to the "real attitude of the feminist organizations."⁸⁵ Nevertheless, the shared proposals still could not bely their continued disagreement over the efficacy of sex-based protective legislation. In addition, although the ODC vocally supported better unionization for women workers, it remains questionable whether they actively participated in that effort.

In the end, the late-twenties debate over sex-based legislation resulted in a political stalemate between Labour's SJC and the ODC feminists. A comprehensive Factory Act was not passed until 1937, and despite the protests of the ODC the new act resembled the 1901 bill. It included special provisions for women and juveniles to limit their hours, duties and exposure to toxins in the workplace, and appears a victory for the Labour women. The controversial

Lead Paint Act also remained in effect. However, both of these pieces of legislation were critically flawed and enabled employers to circumvent important clauses. For example, the 1937 Bill's overtime limitation was qualified to such an extent that the legislated 48-hour week for women and juveniles was practically meaningless.⁸⁶ Likewise, clause 2 of the 1926 Lead Paint Act was amended by the House of Lords. Supported by Lord Bertie, Lord Haldane and Lord Balfour of Burleigh, the House adopted the qualification that women presently employed as painters should not lose their jobs. Later, Tory Home Secretary Joynson-Hicks also appended a special order enabling women and young persons doing "special decorative work" to use lead paint.⁸⁷ This latter adjustment failed to specifically define what constituted "special decorative work," and under this vague term, women and juveniles were still exposed to lead paint in the workplace. Not surprisingly, the ODC applauded these amendments as a partial success. The SJC protested the loopholes, however, they felt confident that the new legislation was still a move in the right direction. Evidently the two opposing groups worked at cross-purposes, undermining one another's efforts, all the while claiming to defend the best interests of working women.

Labour women and the SJC phrased their arguments for protective legislation in class terms. As representatives of working-women, the SJC claimed to understand the conditions and needs of women in industry, whereas the ODC, as middle-class feminists, had no genuine appreciation of industry or working women's lives. In contrast, the ODC defended its interest in the well-being of industrial women and pointed out that many SJC members were also middle-class. While the Labour women stressed class differences to undermine the ODC's position, the latter emphasized the shared discrimination which all women workers experienced, whether

in the professions or industry. Thus, the ODC relied on the feminist assumption of a collective women's interest and female solidarity which transcended class divisions. ODC and Labour Party member Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence voiced these sentiments in a 1929 address to the ODC. She maintained that until women received "economic emancipation" they were not social equals with men, and therefore remained a class apart. A pre-war suffragette, Pethick-Lawrence still firmly believed in the power of a collective feminist consciousness, and lamented the growing divisions within the women's movement, i.e. between "old" and "new" feminists, over protective legislation.⁸⁸

As a Labour Party member, Pethick-Lawrence was not alone in her support for the ODC. Indeed, a number of "new" feminists within the party, including Monica Whately, Dora Russell and Dorothy Jewson, opposed protective legislation. At the 1930 conference of Labour women, Whately supported a motion recommending equal treatment of male and female workers under the terms of Labour's forthcoming Factory Bill. Whately presented her case against protective legislation as a feminist and a socialist. She claimed that protective legislation mitigated against women being able to secure equal wages; and as a socialist, she believed in real equality of opportunity. Yet, despite her socialist convictions, Whately's equality arguments resounded of the ODC liberal individualism, and after some debate, the motion to reconsider its support for sex-specific factory legislation was soundly defeated by the Labour women's conference.⁸⁹

The protective legislation debate of the 1920s involved a constellation of related economic, political and physiological issues. Central to the arguments of the opposing groups were varying ideological definitions of what constituted equality, feminism and social progress. The

arguments of the socialist SJC emphasized the class differences between middle-class feminists and working-women. In contrast, the equalitarian ODC stressed the shared disadvantages all working women experienced, whether as factory operatives, clerical workers, or teachers. Finally, the "new" NUSEC feminists adopted a cautious acceptance of protective legislation, although this was never promoted as a solution to women's industrial exploitation. Fundamental to all three positions was the problem of reconciling women's equality, in the public sphere, as citizens and workers, with women's social and biological difference, as wives and mothers, in the private domestic sphere.

The terms of the debate reveal fundamental ideological discrepancies between the equalitarian feminists and the socialist Labour activists, and suggest their respective political priorities. By stressing class allegiances, the SJC reflected the Labour Party's concern for class unity and party solidarity. However, the SJC defense of protective legislation should not be interpreted as an anti-feminist reaction directed by the male leadership. Their support for protective legislation adheres to the traditional position of female labour activists in the previous century.

The ODC's emphasis on cross-class feminist interests and individual rights indicates a preoccupation with furthering women's political and economic equality. While the equal rights arguments were unrealistic for industrial women, the feminists' motives should be considered in light of the 1920s partial franchise and the increasing discrimination against women, especially professional women, in the workplace. However, to assert a separate set of demands for labouring women would have undermined the ODC's equal rights stance. Given the fragmentation of the women's movement after the suffrage campaign, equal rights feminists no doubt feared the gradual loss of their hard won gains unless they remained

politically vigilant.

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3. Marion Phillips, ed., Women and the Labour Party, (London, 1918), 6.
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26. The Times, February 1, 1929, 13.
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33. Michael Freedman, "Eugenics and Progressive Thought: A Study in Ideological Affinity," Historical Journal, 22:3 (1979), 655.
34. Ibid., 655.
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37. "Women and the Lead Paint Bill," Woman's Leader, November 19, 1926, 371.

38. Jane Lewis, "Beyond Suffrage: English Feminism in the 1920s," Maryland Historian 6 (Spring 1975), 3-4, 7, 12-13.

39. Susan Pedersen, "The Failure of Feminism in the Making of the British Welfare State," Radical History Review 43 (1989), 95.

40. Eleanor Rathbone, "What is Equality?" Woman's Leader, February 11, 1927, 3.

41. Elizabeth Abbott, "What is Equality?", Woman's Leader, February 11, 1927, 4. The debate continued in the following issue, February 25, 20-21, with Mary Stocks defending "new" feminism and Dorothy Balfour of Burleigh speaking for the "old."

42. Helen Ward, "What is Equality? III", Woman's Leader, February 25, 1927, 20.

43. "Women and Lead Poisoning," Woman's Leader, August 20, 1920, 636.

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45. Dr. Rhodda Adamson, "Future Possibilities for the Industrial Work of Women," Common Cause, February 7, 1919, 512-13; and Dr. Janet Campbell, "Women and the Factory," Woman's Leader, February 5, 1926, 9-10.

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83.National Labour Party Annual Conference Report (1930), 22; National Conference of Labour Women (1930), 88-89; Dorothy Jewson, "Report of Labour Women's Conference," Woman's Leader, June 13, 1930, 144.

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Chapter 5:

Conclusion

In their respective discussions of British interwar feminism, historians have identified several reasons for the apparent ineffectiveness of women activists. Historians agree that the re-emergence of profound ideological divisions within the women's movement, divisions which the suffrage campaign only temporarily overcame, contributed to feminism's post-suffrage demise. During the twenties, women activists faced the added challenge of incorporating gender politics into the political agendas of the mainstream parties. Broadly speaking, Labour women attempted this integration by identifying their feminism with socialism and justice for the working class. In contrast, "old" feminists relied on liberal equalitarian ideals and insisted on absolute sexual parity while "new" feminists outside the Labour movement based their maternalist welfare reforms on the Whiggish belief in progressive liberalism.

Although historians acknowledge these ideological divisions, they assume that they could somehow have been overcome had women arrived at some form of political and strategic consensus. Instead of accepting the inevitability of dissenting voices within the women's movement, historians have underestimated the complexity of these profound ideological differences. Instead, historians have attempted to ascertain which women's group best represented feminist aspirations between the wars and which political strategy or party was most sympathetic to women's interests. Marxist feminist Sheila Rowbotham advocates a radical socialist feminism. She believes that once women were admitted to the political process, Labour and liberal feminists neglected their pre-suffrage critique of patriarchal society. "Liberal" historians Brian Harrison, Martin Pugh and Harold Smith maintain the important correlation between liberalism

and feminism. Harrison and Pugh contend that the Liberal Party remained the natural ally of the women's movement. Unfortunately for both Liberalism and feminism, Labour split the progressive vote, thereby rendering both ineffective. "Labour" historians Pat Thane and Christine Collette defend the Labour Party's interest in women's issues and the "new" feminist agenda of its female members. At the national level, Labour was dominated by male trade unionists. However within their local party branches, Labour women made important contributions although their achievements varied considerably with each constituency. While historians offer differing explanations for the demise of feminist politics, their interpretations are often influenced by their own ideological convictions and tactical preferences. Yet the historian's purpose is to identify and explain these ideological differences, recognizing that political alliances and conflicting goals often complicate and potentially undermine the existence of shared gender interests.

During the twenties, women political activists faced the difficult challenge of reconciling their ideological differences. Additionally, they struggled to translate these ideological perspectives into viable public policies to improve the social and economic well-being of all British women. The debate over protective legislation represents a tangible element of this translation process. Reformers grappled with the different needs of industrial and professional working women; moreover, they tried to reconcile demands for equality, with the recognition that, as mothers, women required special treatment. Evidently, the contemporary pre-occupation with women's maternal role profoundly affected the terms of the debate, and shaped the political policies of either side.

By opposing protective legislation, "old" equalitarian feminists in the ODC adhered to the liberal notions of

absolute sexual equality. "New" feminists in the NUSEC acknowledged the liberal ideals of gender parity. However, under Rathbone, "new" feminists accepted the need for sex-based laws in some cases, given the maternalist emphasis of their reform agenda. Except for a small feminist minority, women in the Labour Party endorsed protective legislation as feminists, socialists, trade unionists and party officials.

Notwithstanding the common maternalist goals of Labour women and NUSEC "new" feminists, i.e. their respective support for welfare legislation to assist women to carry out their duties as wives and mothers, fundamental ideological differences prevailed. Labour women were committed to a programme that was both socialist and feminist, and perceived these two ideologies as corresponding approaches to the same end--social justice and an improved standard of living for working-class families.¹ As socialists and trade unionists, Labour women differentiated their feminism from that of middle-class women outside the labour movement, maintaining that the latter had no real understanding of working-class women and were generally unsympathetic to organized labour. Outspoken female Labour activists staunchly upheld this position despite their own middle-class origins, thereby suggesting that the interwar women's movement fragmented along ideological and not necessarily class lines. Moreover, as the nineteenth-century debate over protective legislation indicates, these ideological divisions were long-standing and indeed natural.

In a recent article, Michael Freedman calls for greater attention to the relationship between ideology and the formulation of public policy by political groups. By ideology, Freedman refers to:

empirically demonstrable sets of political ideas and beliefs that exhibit recurring patterns, are held by identifiable groups, and whose function it is to explain, justify or contest political arrangements

within a political community as well as to provide (intentionally or otherwise) plans for action for public political institutions.²

According to Freedden, rather than relying on exclusive "coherent *a priori* models" of Liberalism and Socialism, historians should focus on the important connections between cultural assumptions, political theory and policy debates among various activist groups. He concludes that the analysis of British public policy from the "dominant party political perspective" is potentially misleading, since it fails to recognize that ideologies are "particular and unique configurations of a pool of political concepts."³

Freedden's article refers specifically to the current historiographic debate between "Liberal" and "Labour" historians concerning the ideological origins of the British welfare state. Yet his comments apply equally to our topic-- interwar feminism and its apparent political failure. By adopting the party perspective, historians have defined post-suffrage feminism in terms of its mainstream political alliances. Less emphasis has been placed on the shared aspirations of women's groups or the overlap of ideas between opposing factions. For example, maternalist feminism informed both social reformist and equal rights feminists in their respective demands for women's rights as mothers and as morally superior citizens. Similarly, equal rights and social reform feminists agreed that collective bargaining was still the best means of securing occupational improvements for working-women. In this sense, both sides adopted the traditional anti-interventionist view of laissez-faire Liberalism and organized Labour. The opposing sides differed most because social reformists were not willing to concede state intervention until women had better union representation. Nonetheless, equal rights feminists supported proposals for state-enforced pay equity, another

form of protective legislation.

Unfortunately, despite some common recommendations, conflicting ideological principles effectively undermined the possibility of women's shared political objectives during the interwar period. Cooperation among post-suffrage women activists was further obstructed because the majority of Labour women did not define their goals or themselves as feminist, thus separating female activists in the Labour movement from the predominantly middle-class women's movement. According to Pamela Graves, Labour women readily accepted the Party's call for gender harmony and class loyalty and articulated their political needs in gendered terms.⁴

In their discussions of inter-war feminism, historians have assumed a single definition of gender consciousness in much the same way that many labour historians anticipate the unifying existence of class interests. However, this imposes unrealistic expectations on the interwar women's movement. It was entirely predictable that the post-suffrage women's movement would scatter along ideological lines, as its members contested the meaning of feminist reform and debated the most effective strategies for achieving those goals. As the debate over protective legislation illustrates, women activists during the twenties struggled over exactly what those goals should be and which reforms deserved priority. Such strategic disputes were inevitable, and indeed characterize the development of any newly politicized group.

This is not to suggest that the women's movement is a political myth, or that gender solidarity remains an impossible goal. However, to effectively mobilize women, and achieve feminist change, pressure groups must recognize and accept the ideological differences which potentially undermine much needed cooperation among female activists. In spite of women's differences--based on class, race, sexual

orientation, and political allegiances--they share a history of political exclusion and economic exploitation. Like the feminists in the twenties, let us hope that women still anticipate a future of gender parity between the sexes that does not force us to choose between equality and difference.

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